



“The Ultimate Question”
Luke 9:7-9, 18-20

Idea: What you believe about Jesus is everything.

Intro: Questions are a major part of life and interaction with others. We ask questions like:

- How is your morning going?
- Is your family doing well?
- What is going on at the office lately?
- Did you enjoy your vacation trip?
- Can you explain how I can better execute my assignment?
- What are today’s specials?
- Do you take my insurance?
- Will your team make the playoffs this year?

Questions, literally, encompass every facet of our lives. Goldie Chan, in a 2021 article in *Forbes*, argues that questions are vitally important to everyone. She says, “The power of asking questions in both your work and personal life cannot be understated...” I think we know this to be true. We clearly see it at play in children. Their natural curiosity leads them to incessantly ask questions about everything. They are always wondering why and pondering over the inquisitive how. As children grow into adulthood, however, there is an instinctive shift toward answering questions. Yet, while adults may want to have all the answers to the questions of life, the reality is that no one levels out of questions. We all ask them every day about most everything. It is good to ask questions and to be interested in learning more. As Chan emphasizes, this is good in both our personal and professional lives. The pericope we are examining today reminds us that asking questions is also good for the soul. In fact, it can be the difference between eternal life and eternal death.

As we have been working through Luke’s Gospel, we have learned that Jesus is Lord over nature, demons, sickness, and even death. He possesses all power over these things. We have also seen Jesus radically transform the lives of every person who in faith believed on Him. When individuals or crowds were confused or offended by Him and sought to entrap or even kill Him, Jesus demonstrated His sovereignty over the situation. Likewise, when He sent out the twelve disciples to preach and heal, His power went with them. They returned and shared all that they were able to do. As the people in Galilee and Jerusalem heard the stories of all the miraculous things taking place through Jesus, they wondered who He might be. Surely, the crowd of 15,000 plus people in Bethsaida who enjoyed a fish supper questioned the identity of Jesus. They were in awe because five tortillas and two sardines fed such a great multitude, so they wondered, “Who is this Jesus?” It seems like everyone was asking this question. Herod the tetrarch even asked this question.

Read Luke 9:7-9, 18-20.

Inquiry: Who is Jesus? This is the ultimate question of life. Luke, beautifully and strategically, sets this question before his readers. The first phrasing of the question came from Herod in response to the people's speculations. In response to all the miracles and powerful teaching they were hearing in the land, the people wondered if Jesus was a resurrected John the Baptist, an Elijah, or another prophet of old. Herod remembered John's teaching and how he liked to listen to him. He also vividly remembered ordering his execution in response to Herodias' request (Mark 6:14-29). Certain aspects of what Herod was hearing about Jesus were eerily similar to what he knew about John the Baptist. For this reason, Herod "*sought to see Him.*"

The second phrasing of this ultimate question comes from Jesus' own lips as He asks, "*Who do the crowds say that I am?*" (9:18). In moving to this account, Luke skips over seven important events in Christ's life and ministry that are recorded in Mark's Gospel (Mark 6:45-8:26). Each of the four Gospel authors, wrote for specific reasons. Luke's purpose in writing His Gospel and Acts is to give an orderly account of the things that Theophilus has been taught (1:3-4). He writes to help this man know with certainty the answer to life's ultimate question.

Jesus' question to His disciples about His identity took place in Caesarea Philippi as recorded in Matthew 16:13-20. This location was named by Philip II (a son of Herod the Great) in honor of Roman Emperor Augustus. It is located on the slopes of Mount Herman. This settlement sat at the base of a large rock face from which water flowed out. This water source was and is known as Banias Springs. It is one of three tributaries of the Jordan River. Following the conquest of Alexander the Great, Greek culture came to the region and a temple was built to the god Pan called the Panaeon.

Pan was believed to be a sensual and brutal god. He was depicted as being half human and half goat. The people feared being tortured and raped by him in the woods, so they would sacrifice goats to him and perform lewd sexual acts. Child sacrifice was also part of Pan worship. Banias Springs, at the base of the rock face where water flowed out, was believed to be a gate into hell. There was a large rock that emerged out of the water in front of this gate. Upon this rock, children were thrown against it until the water downstream turned blood red.

With this scene in the background, Jesus asked His disciples the ultimate question. He initially asked it in relation to how the crowds were answering the question. The twelve disciples answered it similarly to what Herod was hearing and contemplating. Jesus was perhaps a resurrected John, Elijah, or a prophet of old. This response reminds us that everyone has a theory about Jesus. It is interesting that in this situation all the responses were religious theories. They were also all supernatural. They all believed Jesus was a resurrected prophet. They also were all wrong. Crowds rarely answer important questions.

While Jesus initially inquired about the public's opinion, He was not going to get sidetracked by the latest poll. Jesus quickly moved on to the more important question, "*Who do you say that I am?*" (9:20). Peter answered on behalf of the twelve disciples saying, "*The Christ of God.*" Matthew presents a fuller confession, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God*" (Matt 16:16). In response to Peter's confession and answer to the ultimate question, Jesus states that upon this rock (this confession) He will build His church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it (Matt 16:18). Could it be that Jesus brought His disciples to this wicked place known for its spiritual darkness to show that there only two options? There is light that brings life, and there is darkness that brings death. Could it be that Jesus used this backdrop to teach them that the ἐκκλησία (the called-out ones), the church, is in the business of calling people out of darkness and into the light?

Let's consider this ultimate question.

1. Asking the question.

The people in Galilee and Judea knew something of Jesus. Some of them had firsthand experience with Jesus. They were present in Capernaum and other places around the Sea of Galilee when Jesus performed miracles. They witnessed the sick being healed, the blind regaining sight, and the dead being raised. Some of them had an even greater experience with the Lord because they were the ones He had healed and raised from the dead. Others' experience with Jesus was second and third hand. They had heard the stories and met people who had encountered and been healed by Jesus. There was no doubt in their mind that something great had happened, but they were unable to fully explain it or define who Jesus was.

The people in Palestine asked the ultimate question. In their quest to understand who Jesus was, they began at the same place that everyone does. They asked, "Who is this Jesus?" It is no different today for us. Like the people in Palestine, we hear stories of how Jesus has changed and is changing people's lives. We read these stories in the Bible. We hear them from our friends. When we hear these stories and consider what they mean, it is good to ask, "Who is this Jesus?"

Have you asked for yourself, "Who is Jesus?"

We dare not stop with the question. The very purpose of asking a question is to seek an answer.

2. Answering the question.

The Jews who were seeing miracles and hearing incredible stories about Jesus were asking the right question. They sought an answer, so they answered it based on what they knew of God and how He works. They saw God's hand and power at work in Jesus, so He must surely be a prophet. In fact, for them, Jesus was not merely a new prophet, He must be a great prophet whom God has resurrected. It is interesting how close to the gospel message these people were. They believed that God could and even would resurrect the dead. They believed that God could and would speak and work through His messenger. The supernatural was not too much of a stretch for their faith. Unfortunately, they came to the wrong conclusions. Most people do. Most people will not answer the ultimate question like Peter did. Most people will not answer by declaring that Jesus is the Christ of God, the holy anointed Savior who has laid down His life as a ransom for man's sin. Instead, most people will conclude like the Jews in the story that Jesus was a miracle worker, a great teacher, a religious leader, a good man, or a great example. They will say these great things about Jesus while failing to acknowledge the true identity of Jesus; that He is Christ and the Son of God.

We dare not come to the wrong conclusion, even if we say good things about Jesus. C. S. Lewis vividly makes this point in his book *Mere Christianity*. He says:

"I am trying 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 – on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg – 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."

Who is Jesus? The Bible emphatically answers this question for us. He is "*the Christ, the Son of the living God*" (Matt 16:15).

How have you answered this ultimate question? How can we be sure of the right answer?

3. Settling the question.

Jesus pressed the disciples for a personal answer to life's ultimate question. It is imperative that we never allow ourselves to be satisfied with following the crowd and settling for what others believe. While the Christian faith is a corporate faith, individual believers must first come to their own moment of belief.

Illust: I am a follower of Jesus Christ, and I a member of this local church of believers. Together we believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. It is awesome to belong to the church and be part of God's kingdom people. While I relish this privilege, I am only in this favored position because on April 24, 1997, I responded in faith to the gospel, turned from my sin, and experienced the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ. I settled life's ultimate question for myself. And I settled it not based on what I think or what others think. I settled it based solely on what God's Word declares and in response to how God's Spirit awakened my spirit to new life.

After Peter declared his and the disciples' faith, Jesus responded by saying, "*Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven*" (Matt 16:17). The Bible is God's full revelation to humanity. We can know nothing of God outside of what is revealed within the cannon of Scripture. At the same time, we cannot fully understand what is contained in Scripture without the illuminating work of God's Spirit teaching and guiding us into all truth.

How have you settled the ultimate question? Who is Jesus? C. S. Lewis rightly concluded that Jesus can only be a liar, a lunatic, or the Lord. The Word of God makes this abundantly clear. Do you believe the testimony of Scripture about Jesus?

Conclusion: We all ask questions. We ask and answer dozens of questions each and every day. Already, this morning, you asked questions like:

- What will I wear?
- What will I eat?
- Am I going to Red Lane for small groups or just worship?

It is good to ask questions. Better yet, is good to be interested in learning more. The verses before us today reveal that asking and answering one particular question can be the difference between eternal life and eternal death.

Who is Jesus? Have you answered and settled this question for yourself? This question must be settled by each of us individually. We cannot avoid, duck, or put off the question. The Lord of lords asks us all. Heaven has a one-question pop quiz for all humanity, "Who do you say Jesus is?"

Let's stand and think about this question. What is your answer? How have you settled it? Do you know for certain that you are in relationship with Jesus Christ? Have you responded in faith to the gospel, turned from your sin, and experienced the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ? If you have not yet responded in faith and repentance, do you sense God calling you to this? Do you feel conviction over your sin and a need for forgiveness? If so, then I want to call you to surrender to Jesus. Answer life's ultimate question by declaring Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. As the Christ, Jesus is our propitiation for sin. He has offered His blood to pay our sin debt. As the Son of God, He is the only one holy and worthy to die in our place and take the full wrath of the Father against our sin.

Who is Jesus to you?