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Title: Questions Jesus Asked: Who Do People Say That I Am?

Preaching: Ryan Hazen, Lead Pastor Mud Creek Campus

Text: [Mark 8:27-30](#)

E-mail: [Ryan Hazen](#)

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As an introvert, the worst parts of any meeting or workshop or conference are the opening “get-acquainted games” or dreaded “ice-breakers.” My family will tell you that I hate to be late for anything but the one time that I make an exception is if I know there are going to be get-acquainted games at the beginning of a meeting. I will try to

time my arrival perfectly so as to arrive as the games are ending and the real purpose of the meeting is beginning.

The only game that I’ve ever been subjected to that I kinda-sorta like just a little is a game called “Who Am I?” The host of the meeting puts a Post-It Note on your back with the name of a famous person written on it. You then must mingle and ask other people questions to determine the name on the Post-It - your temporary identity. For example, the unknown-to-you name on your back might be George Washington. You go to work mixing with people in the room narrowing the possibilities by asking YES or NO questions. Usually, people start from the most general of questions and move to more specific questions – Am I a real person? Am I dead? Was I male? Was I a president? Did I cross the Delaware as General in the Continental Army? AM I GEORGE WASHINGTON? (It’s not usually that easy by the way).

What about your identity? What is it that defines you? Who are you? Usually, we define people by titles and we all have titles. I’m not talking about titles like “Her Majesty the Queen” or “Mr. President” but more about titles that describe the roles we fill. For example, I’m Ruth’s husband. I’m Will and Matt’s dad. I’m a minister and colleague. I’m Ron’s brother. I’m Kuma’s poop picker-upper (I had to throw that in lest you thought I lived a totally charmed life). Those are the titles that I have and the roles I fill.

Today, we’re looking at the question of identity as we move down the road toward Jerusalem. We continue to examine the questions that Jesus asked over his ministry as a part of our Lenten sermon series. So far, we've looked

at WHY ARE YOU AFRAID? WHO TOUCHED MY CLOTHES? and HOW MUCH BREAD DO YOU HAVE? Today, we have two questions and we're going to look at them in tandem – WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM? and WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM? For the disciples, and perhaps for us, those are different questions with different answers.

One is about what other people think – WHO DO **PEOPLE** SAY THAT I AM? The follow-up - WHO DO **YOU** SAY THAT I AM? is much more personal. Both are good questions but we have a hard time knowing why Jesus, who is asking these questions, wants to know. The scene is just outside of Caesarea Philippi, a village 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It's a very Roman setting and once was the limit of ancient Israel's northward extension. Jesus is walking with his disciples when he asks them what the people are saying about him – our first question – WHO DO PEOPLE SAY THAT I AM? By this time in Mark's story, the disciples have been with Jesus for some time and have seen him cure the sick, cast out demons, feed literally thousands of people, and even restore life to a young girl. He seems to be using the disciples as a kind of focus group to test his effectiveness to date.

The disciples answer Jesus by reporting that the crowds indeed recognize that he is special. "And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah, and still others, one of the prophets.'" (Mark 8:28). Then Jesus gets to what seems like is his real question, asking the disciples themselves, directly, "But who do you say that I am?" (Mark 8:29). And again, the disciples respond. Peter declares that Jesus isn't just a prophet but is the long-awaited Messiah, the one anointed by God to save all of Israel. "You are the Messiah!" You can almost hear him shouting it, so everyone can hear. "You are the Christ!" That's the Greek word for Messiah. It has connotations of a king coming on a mighty stallion and using military power to vanquish foes.

In Matthew's gospel, immediately following Peter's bold affirmation, Jesus says, "Peter, you are right! You are the Rock and on the rock I will build my church." But not here – not in Mark's gospel. In Mark, Jesus responds to Peter by saying, essentially "Shhh! Let's keep this on the down-low. Let's not say anything to anybody about this Messiah stuff." It says that Jesus STERNLY ordered them not to tell anyone about him. We've mentioned it before but throughout Mark, when Jesus is recognized for who he is, he tells the one that has identified him correctly to keep quiet about it.

It is at this point in our journey to Easter that Jesus shifts gears pretty dramatically. We are almost exactly at Mark's midpoint and our passage initiates a major shift in Mark's plot. The word *Christ* has not appeared since the opening verse of chapter one. We have had seven-plus chapters of

Jesus' ministry, questions asked about his true identity and authority, secrets told and disclosure promised, and demonic powers identifying Jesus as God's Son. But, to this point, readers have been given no indication that death awaits Jesus. Now, he moves to use a very different word to describe his identity. He calls himself the Son of Man. ¹

Jesus outlines what he's going to have to undergo for being who he is - the rejection of the religious authorities. For the first time, he talks about suffering, about being put to death. And he says it plainly with no sugar coating. The disciples are shocked. Peter responds as we might if someone told us that they had received a terminal diagnosis. He grabs Jesus and says "No! This can't be! This should never happen to you." Peter, the Rock, doesn't like the implications of his Messiah suffering and dying. That's not what Messiahs do.

Jesus' response to Peter had to sting. "But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'" (Mark 8:33). Then it says that Jesus calls people together and gives them a definition of what following him really will mean from this point forward. He seems to be preparing them for what he knows - there will be hard days ahead and this won't be easy for him or his followers. He says to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (Mark 8:34b-35).

For the first time really, he defines what following him actually means: more than traipsing around watching him perform miracles - it's self-denial and cross-bearing. Now we see where this road of discipleship will lead: losing one's life in order to save it. Following will also make a particular kind of statement since crosses figure in the equation. It's going to get messy.

The pointed question "Who do you say that I am?" gets personal and uncomfortable. Because when we really have to say who Jesus is to us, we also have to answer the question, "who do we say that we are?" That's the rub of this question, the heart of its difficulty. If we only had to provide an answer to Jesus' question of **HIS** identity, that would be one thing. However, answering the question of Jesus' identity is also having to give voice to **OUR** identity and that starts to make us squirm. Who you say Jesus is, is who you have decided to be. You can't answer Jesus' inquiry without revealing who you are.

Jesus' question is not a test. It's not about getting the answer right on paper or saying the right words. We can say lots of things without really meaning what we say. Peter had the words right and got rebuked. It's about getting the answer right in your heart. It's the moment when you come face-to-face with your commitment, your discipleship, your own identity. It's the moment when you have to admit that the extent to which you follow Jesus connects with the confession of who you believe Jesus to be.

"Who do you say that I am?" is directly tied to being willing to risk being known for what you believe. It's recognizing that your identity cannot be separated from who you proclaim Jesus to be. Peter has to answer the question, as do every single one of Jesus' disciples, as do we.

Peter was able to say, "You are the Messiah. You are the Christ. You are the Anointed One of God. You're the one we're supposed to follow." Yet when Jesus began to sit down with his disciples and teach them what it meant for him to be Messiah – what it meant to really follow him – Peter suddenly finds himself realizing that he didn't fully understand the question.

Peter wants and needs a strong God. We get Peter because Peter is us. Strength is everything, might makes right, and possessions define our value. But God employs a different calculus and measures strength not in terms of might but of love, not by victory but vulnerability, not in possessions but sacrifice, not by glory but by the cross. Jesus knows this; but Peter does not, at least not yet. Ultimately, later, much later in our story – maybe not until Easter morning – will Peter realize that instead of getting the God he wants, he gets the God he needs.

While it's easy to look through this window at Peter and say he should have known better when Jesus asked the question – Who Do You Say That I Am? – it's not as easy when that window is a mirror. Imagine Jesus asking you that question – RYAN, MARY, STEVE, BECKY, Who do you say that I am?

Let's play a get-acquainted game to see how we're doing. I love get-acquainted games. You don't have to mingle but imagine me giving you a Post-It Note to put on your back. But instead of that Post-It having someone else's name on it, that Post-It Note, unbeknownst to you, has YOUR NAME on it. Like the original game, you have to ask questions of others to figure out your identity. But instead of asking about roles and titles, you ask about character traits, you ask about what defines the person inside. Is this person Christ-like in their actions? Do they treat other people with compassion? Does this person serve the poor? Does this person give generously?

Would you come up with you? Would I come up with me?

Who people say we are relates directly to who we say Jesus is. Are we even willing to ask the question? Or do we stay silent, afraid of what people might say, perhaps worried about what truth might get uttered? Do we avoid the question altogether, so we can exude a kind of confidence we don't have? Jesus knows it's one of the hardest questions to ask — which is why he asks it in the first place, and why he has to ask it first. Who do you say Jesus is? It defines who you are.

¹ Information in this paragraph from Commentary on Mark 8:27-38 by Matt Skinner, published September 12, 2012 at www.workingpreacher.org.