

## The Self or the Christ?

Mark 8:27-9:1 | Jonathan K. Dodson | March 2, 2014

This is the hinge passage, the hinge question, of the whole book of Mark. Everything turns on it, on Jesus' question: "Who do you say that I am?" Not who do others say, not what does your culture say, or what your brain tells you he is, *but who do you really say he is*, with conviction, with heart? Who do you say he is? Your entire person will turn on this answer, and your answer will determine your response to a next question buried in text: "What is a disciple of Jesus?" It's an archaic word, but a current concept—fans, devotees, followers. What does a disciple of Christ *look like*? Who do you say that I am? Two big questions.

### Who Do You Say That I Am?

On his way to some villages, Jesus turns to his disciples and asks "Who do people say that I am?" He gets a string of predictable Jewish options. What about Austin, who do think people in Austin say Jesus is? So if that's the word on the street, who do *you* say Jesus is? When Jesus asks his followers, he's trying to draw them out. He's asking for a confession. A confession is a public declaration of a personal conviction. It's something you're not ashamed of, you're out in the open with it. *At some point the crowds, the colleagues, and even the disciples have to look deep within Jesus to make a decision that will either align or distance them from Jesus.* Who do *they* say that he is? Peter speaks up for the twelve. He's kinda like me in my youth, quick to speak, slow to listen. I'm still quick to speak. Peter says, and up to this point the only other confessions like this are from spiritual forces (demons), he says "**You are the Christ.**" He put it out there. The first one to admit it, to go public with it, to commit to Jesus, not just as a great teacher or a Jewish prophet, but the promised messiah of God. You are the one, he says! But then, when Jesus begins to elaborate on what the messiah will *do*—suffer, die and rise—it's completely out of focus with Peter's vision. He's experiencing what psychologists call cognitive dissonance, the feeling of discomfort that results from holding two conflicting beliefs. What Peter's brain believes about Jesus isn't matching up with what Jesus is telling him to believe! The discomfort is so acute, he pulls "the Christ" aside to rebuke him. After all, Jesus just told Peter he was right about him being the Christ. But, then, Jesus counter-rebuked. What's happening?! They can't both be right! *It is possible to have the right answers about who Jesus is and be entirely wrong about the **meaning** of that answer.* It's like cheating on a test. You look over and copy the answer, but could never solve the problem on your own. Peter can't add it all up. This is also true of the so-called "the religious South," but you don't have to be religious to have cognitive dissonance over Jesus. Consider all the liberal "Jesuses" you guys mentioned earlier. In fact, *true followers of Jesus can experience this dissonance*, as they slip into liberal and conservative versions of the Christ. Who does your life say Jesus really is? To see, consider how do you treat him week in and week out. Do you have a **Sunday Jesus**, who you don't really relate to throughout the week? He's kind of a trinket, something you pull out on the weekends to make yourself feel good or sentimental? Maybe a **foxhole Jesus**, when the bombs fly and everything hits the fan, you run to Jesus for help, and if he doesn't pull through like you want, well you blame him or someone else. Foxhole Jesus is a Jesus to pull out in hard times. Maybe for you he's **doctrine Jesus**, an idea you defend, a philosophy you debate, a book you read or look at, but he's not a person you *worship*, love, & enjoy.

Christianity is your belief system, but not your way of worship. Then there's **Cramp your style Jesus**. Frankly, you're ashamed of him. You'd rather people not know you're a follower of Jesus. [downtown] Who do you "say" Jesus is? You can get the answer right—the Christ—and still be completely wrong. Jesus responds by filling out who the Christ is: "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" (8:31). You can hear the hinge creaking. Jesus says these things *must* happen. The verbs are all aorists, past tense—suffer, rejected, killed, and rise—which means Jesus is saying *it's a done deal*. He's speaking "plainly," which actually means he's shooting straight. **Jesus is dead serious about being a suffering messiah**. That's his identity. Now why is this so alarming? The word "messiah" comes from Daniel 7, where the Son of Man is described as a divine ruler of the nations, securer of the peace for Israel, possessing all power and authority. At this point this would have been the most common conception of the Messiah, an end-time king. There is of course the image of the suffering servant in Isaiah (43-45), but there is little evidence in Judaism that these texts were associated with the Messiah. So, when Jesus begins talking about suffering, dying, and rising from the dead, this catches Peter completely off guard. Peter wants that Danielic kingdom now, enemies destroyed, judgment and salvation for Israel. *Peter wants to preserve power, not give power away*. And who can blame him? There's nothing wrong with running to Jesus in the foxhole for deliverance, or for worshipping him faithfully on a Sunday, or getting neck deep in the apologetics and philosophy, *unless* this is all we do, *unless* we're **using Christ for his power instead of relying on his power to honor Christ**. See, when our vision of Jesus collides with the real Jesus, sparks fly. Something more than cognitive dissonance is afoot. He says to Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the concerns of God, but on the concerns of man." The cause of cognitive dissonance over Jesus is spiritual, the means is merely mental. Trapped in our own reason, conflicting beliefs alone is discomfoting, but the solution isn't merely to harmonize beliefs, or correct the biblical picture of Jesus. Instead, we need to recognize the real Jesus, and demonic traps to fashion your version of him. We need a greater power to topple Satan. Ironically, this power will come in the form of a *crucified* messiah. [Haydn]

### What is a Disciple of Jesus?

While Jesus morbid future surprises Peter, it comes as no surprise to us—a country well versed in the iconic cross, decorated with a nail-pierced Jesus. *What we have trouble with is surrendering power* not embracing a crucified messiah. The idea that Jesus would lay claim to all of our lives—money, sex, relationships, career, future, moral decisions, childrearing—is downright offensive. But Lordship is part of Jesus' messianic identity. He is also the risen Lord. Sensing the importance of the moment, Peter's confession, the nearby crowds, and a Satanic attack, Jesus knows its gametime, he knows time to lead, to lay it all down and start moving to Jerusalem, to the cross *and* the empty tomb. So he swings the doors wide open for anyone to come after him, to be a follower: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (8:34). Three *musts*: deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me. Deny Yourself, now there's a controversial bumper sticker. We believe in "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Americans say "Fulfill Yourself" not "Deny Yourself." Like Peter, we are prone to set out minds on the concerns of man not

God. We attend to the Self. Our sense of self-fulfillment can be traced back to the 60's, where all authority, especially the hegemonic post-industrial complex, was not only questioned but outright rejected. Down with the man. In the place of government and God, stood the Self, what sociologist Philip Rieff called "the psychological man." This man stands atop his need, possessing the authority and right to be fulfilled. He was born to be pleased. Whatever he or she likes, they should be free to pursue—fair treatment, sexual appetites, endless therapy, better parents, the ideal job. Jesus stands up and says, "Deny yourself!" The word "deny" means to have disregard. Perhaps what we feel for *Cramp your style Jesus*, disassociation, like Peter disassociated from Christ in his hour of greatest need. When you look at your **income**, do you deny it being yours, to you disassociate any ownership over it, do you recognize all things are from him, through him, and to him, and give accordingly? When people ask for your **time**, your counsel, your help, your encouragement, your words, do you deny yourself some downtime, your own private thoughts, and forgetting yourself pour encouragement, life, and hope into others? Or are you busy fulfilling the Self? Positive examples that come to mind: singles in our church who freely babysit, mothers who relentlessly serve our children, city group leaders who work hard to put others first in prayer, counsel. I think of Preston McGee or Rachel Vanhover. Living a life of self-denial means we recognizing a power greater than Self, an authority truer than Man. This brings us to the second mark of a disciple, **take up your cross**. When Jesus says this, it lights up in meaning for the crowds. Not long ago General Crassus had lined the Appian Way with thousands of slaves who rebelled against Rome, led by Spartacus, and hung them on crosses. This is what Rome does to those who oppose authority. The cross was an instrument of suffering, but more importantly, it was a sign of *authority*. It was Rome saying: "we caught you and you are under our thumb." Carrying a cross, then, is all about *submission to authority*. And it isn't the submission that makes it oppressive, it's the authority, the one whom we submit to. Good authority you flourish; bad authority and you don't. Regardless, submission is very difficult for the Self. Because we live not only for self-fulfillment, but also under self-rule. David Wells notes that he is "[stripped of all reference points outside him or herself. There is no moral world, no ultimate rights and wrongs, and no one to whom he or she is accountable](#)" (God in the Whirlwind, 26). Why take up your cross, when you already have the authority of Self, and are only accountable to your perceived needs? Like Peter, Jesus is rebuking us for the arrogance of our alternative authority and our contrived visions of "the Christ." We have set up a whole new god.

### Is it Worth Following Jesus?

The final requirement of a disciple is **follow me**. Who's ready to sign up? It may sound like Jesus is a killjoy, but nothing could be further from the truth. He says: "[For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it](#)" (35). Jesus gives a reason, a "for," to explain why he's worth following. This reasoning terminates on him, **Crucified and King**, he's worth it, worth it all. How? A threat and reward. First the **threat**. Jesus says if you try to save your life, your *psyche*, you will lose it. You can try to fill yourself with all that stuff, but when I come back with the glory of the Father, you'll regret it. You'll see that you lost your soul, you sold it to the Devil. Don't try to save your life, to secure your identity on your own (clothes, scenes, jobs). Don't fall for the seductive power of the Self. Self-fulfillment is commitment to a hopeless enterprise. Here's

why: 1) We lack the authority to call the shots on human fulfillment. We can't see our true needs clearly. We misdiagnose with human love, social interaction, sexual pleasure, and so on. 2) We were fundamentally made for fulfillment not through getting but through giving, through *service* or worship. We actually work properly, not when we are avidly pursuing self-fulfillment, but when we are doggedly devoted to the Lord of Glory. The mission of self-fulfillment will never work because you're trying to fill an infinite void with finite things. We need a Christ who is King, who has the authority to tell us what we are made for—worship—to glorifying and enjoying him, to feasting on the Infinite. In Jesus, we find the end-time King, full of the glory of the Father, to whom we're meant to say, "I'll follow you. I worship you." We're tipping over into the **reward**. Jesus says, "[lose your life for my sake and the gospel's and you will save it.](#)" He's not a killjoy because he's appealing to our sense of gain, life, and joy. That life is found in worship. Everything else is disposable when we've found the One who lasts, who never runs out of joy, peace, and grace. Now, to get this, we need a Christ different than Peter's—all power and no sacrifice. We need a *crucified* Lord, power *and* sacrifice. Why? Because of the spit in the face, the denial of Jesus, the cosmic crime. We need a God who is willing to repeal the sin of humanity's relentless search for meaning apart from him. He should judge us all. But instead he bears the judgment. He should reject us, but instead he is rejected. He is Christ before he is Lord. We need a savior who rehabilitates the heart not just changes the mind. Who forgives the psychological man and creates the doxological man. And there we have it in Jesus. Pure, undeserved grace.

**Crucified and King.** When you find the real Jesus, taking up his cross (for you) and rising in glory (for the world), it's a no brainer to devote everything to him. To do it for his sake (worship) and for the gospel (others). When we worship the Crucified Lord, we realize that everyone is a fulltime disciple, sent to tell others about him, to deny ourselves, and take up our cross, and follow him, for his fame and the gospel. In other words, a disciple is someone who reorients their *whole life* around the Christ.