

**Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL**  
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**Worship Series: *The Church God Wants***  
**Service Theme: *A Church That Really Knows Jesus***  
**Sermon Theme: *The All-Important Question (Aug 27, 2023)***  
**Matthew 16:13-20**

In the course of life, there are a lot of important questions we have to answer. “What do you want to be when you grow up?” “Will you marry me?” “Will you take the job promotion and relocate?” “Should we start having kids?” “Should we have more kids?” “When will you retire?” “Where will you retire to?” “Is it time to put Mom in a nursing home?” “Should we take him off life support?”

Those are important questions, because how you answer them will have major impact and implications for so many aspects of your life! But compared to all those important questions, there is one **All-Important Question** that outweighs them all. A question which, depending on how you answer it, changes everything about your life, and also your eternity! The all-important question that Jesus poses to each one of us this morning, ***“Who do you say I am?”***

Jesus cares deeply about how people answer that all-important question of his identity. That’s why, one day, he asked his disciples, ***“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”*** They reported some of the most common ideas being floated: ***“Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”*** That’s no list of slouches! Those were all big names—prominent, influential prophets who were important mouthpieces for God to the Israelites. And because of the long list of miracles Jesus had done, and the large crowds who followed his every move, the people believed Jesus must be one of those prominent prophets come back from the dead!

It was a compliment that so many people identified Jesus with those great prophets. Likewise, there are many people today who say all kinds of complimentary things about Jesus. They’ll say Jesus is one of

the most influential people who ever lived. A great agent of change in the world. One of the most important religious leaders ever. A great teacher whose lessons and knowledge still resonate today. An inspirational model of love, forgiveness, and perseverance that everyone should seek to emulate.

Complimentary, no doubt! But when it comes to answering the all-important question about Jesus’ identity, what matters most isn’t giving a nice answer, but answering the all-important question correctly! So Jesus turns his attention to his 12 disciples and asked them the all-important question, ***“But what about you?” Who do you say I am?”***

Jesus’ words in Greek here show that he doesn’t just care about what other people think about him. He’s concerned about who YOU individually think he is! Basically, he says to his disciples, ***“You! Who do you say I am?”*** doubly emphasizing the “you.”

As often happened, Simon Peter speaks up for the group, confessing about Jesus, ***“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”*** Let’s break down what Peter is saying about Jesus with these words. First, he calls Jesus the “Messiah.” Literally, in Greek, *ὁ Χριστός*. As you might guess, that means “the Christ.” Did you know that “Christ” isn’t Jesus’ last name, but a title. “Christos” is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word, “Meshiach,” Messiah, both meaning, ***“the Anointed One.”***

In biblical times, when someone was anointed by having oil poured over their head, it symbolically showed that they had been chosen by God for a special task or purpose-- like kings, priests, and prophets. So to call someone the “Christ,” or “Messiah,” was to denote them as the one God had chosen for the ultimate special task and purpose! The one God promised to send, who would save and restore his people. The one that God promised first to Adam and Eve after their fall into sin, and continued to promise, prophesy, and point to throughout the Old Testament.

And not just God's chosen one, but the very Son of God himself! Not like the lifeless idols or false gods that only live in people's imaginations, Jesus is the Son of the true and living God, who not only gives life physically and spiritually, but who is life! Peter answers the ultimate question by saying that Jesus is so much more than just an influential teacher or historical figure. He's God's chosen Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God!

And now Jesus' expectant eyes turn to you, as he asks, ***"But what about you?" Who do you say I am?"*** Like I said earlier, that question of Jesus' identity is all-important, because how you answer it affects everything in your life and eternity.

For example, if you believe that Jesus is just a man—even if it's in a complimentary way; that he's a great humanitarian, teacher, historical figure, or even a great prophet of God-- how will that affect your life? If that's all you think Jesus is, at best, all he can do is motivate you. He's a role model you should seek to emulate; a motivational speaker who gets you pumped to live your life in a certain way. But he can't be your Savior. Because even if Jesus lived a perfectly holy life as just a man, who would it count for? Only himself! If you got pulled over for speeding, and I pulled up and informed the police officer, "It's OK, don't give them a ticket! I was going the speed limit!" he's gonna tell me to get lost! Because as human beings, what I do to keep the law doesn't count for you!

So if that's how we answer the question of Jesus' identity, your life will become a constant struggle of trying to be good enough and do enough good, because it's all up to us; a life spent counting and calculating, but never feeling certain; a life of "What Would Jesus Do?" pressure to measure up to Jesus' example of grace, obedience and love. Which means a life of guilt, shame, and overwhelming pressure when we fail; a life of apathy or dejected despair when we realize we can't measure up. Because as Paul writes, ***"There is no difference...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*** And that won't just affect our earthly lives. Because we haven't and

can't measure up to God's perfect standard, our eternity will be one of unending suffering and separation from God in Hell!

Or you might say that Jesus is the Son of God, but not a true man. How will that affect your life? It makes Jesus the angry judge, who's constantly watching your every move; counting your every sin; waiting for the opportunity to dole out wrath and punishment on sinners like us. But certainly not a God who's able to empathize with our weakness and struggle!

Or, he's the cosmic clockmaker, who created the world, started it ticking, and then lets it do its thing without care or personal intervention. But certainly not a God who came to be one of us, so that we can be one with him.

If Jesus is only God, then he's holy, but he can't be our Savior. Because as Paul writes, ***"The wages of sin is death."*** And as Hebrews reminds, ***"Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins."*** The immortal God, who is Spirit, couldn't die the death our sins deserve, or shed his blood to atone for the sins of the world. Which means, once again, a life for us filled with struggle, guilt, and shame; a life of apathy or animosity toward the God who has such impossible expectations, but won't lift a finger to help. And ultimately, an eternity destined for destruction.

Or you might say that Jesus is nothing but a crutch, a fairy tale for weak-minded people who just want something to believe in that makes them feel better. That Jesus was nothing more than a normal man whose followers posthumously turned him into something he never was or intended to be. How will that affect your life? If Jesus is of no importance, and God doesn't exist, then you get to be "god" in your life-- a life which ultimately can't have lasting meaning-- until you die, and cease to exist. That kind of personal control and lack of accountability might seem attractive to lots of people. But what if your answer to the ultimate question-- is wrong?

Or, like Peter, you can confess that Jesus is fully God and fully man. The Messiah. The Christ. The Anointed One, whose love for us led

him to lift so much more than a finger, but to give up everything so he could lift up a cross and suffer the punishments of Hell. And as true God, it can count for the whole world! If that's your answer to the ultimate question of Jesus' identity, then your life can be filled with peace instead of fear, joy instead of guilt. Because it's not up to you to do it yourself. Jesus, the Messiah, has already done it for you, taking your place as your perfect substitute! And it means that your eternity is set and certain—because as Peter confessed, Jesus is ***“the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”***

If that's who Jesus is, then he must be the number one priority in every aspect of life! Everything else takes a backseat to the one who is our Savior and Lord. There's no room for half-hearted discipleship, or apathetic Christianity! If that's our answer to the ultimate question, then our lives and eternity must revolve around Jesus and his grace!

That's why Jesus cares so deeply about how we answer that all-important question. Not because Jesus wants us to compliment him and boost his ego! He cares that we know the correct answer to that all-important question, because as Paul wrote in Romans, ***“If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”*** God wants us to be a church that really knows Jesus, because that's the only way we can be saved eternally!

Peter's beautiful, faithful confession of Jesus is the rock-solid foundation that the entire Christian church is built upon. It all stands or falls on the truth that Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the world. That's the invincible truth, which Jesus promises, ***“The gates of Hades will not overcome...”*** We sometimes picture the “poor little church,” barely hanging on as Satan and the forces of evil launch one attack after another, picking off believers left and right. But Jesus says the gates of Hell will not overcome it. Gates are defensive, not offensive, protecting against attacks, not going on the attack. So Jesus paints the picture not of God's church barely holding on, but of the power and beauty of God's Gospel crushing the life out of Hell, triumphing for God and his people! And all of that stands on the true answer to the

all-important question, ***“Who do you say I am?” “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”***

Where does such a faith, such an answer come from? As Jesus told Peter, ***“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.”*** If we understand that, and that God wants a church that really knows Jesus, the implications will be so evident in a church's worship and ministry.

There are plenty of Christian churches whose sermons briefly mention Jesus as Savior in the intro, toss in some Bible passages, and then basically share “10 tips to help you be a better spouse/parent/worker, etc.” If that's the primary focus of the church's message proclaim, what does that communicate about Jesus? That he's a self-help guru, motivational speaker, or “Dear Abby” advice columnist who can help you be a better, more successful person. But where does that understanding of Jesus leave us? Exhausted. Ashamed. Despairing, because although we heard the message and thoroughly took notes, we're still not everything we want to be.

There are plenty of churches whose main ministry emphasis is social gospel—feeding the hungry, getting the homeless under a roof, standing up for the marginalized. That's not wrong, but if that's the main priority of our ministry, what does that say about Jesus? That he's a role model or example for us to follow; a change agent we need to emulate so we can change the world for good. But if we only supply people's physical needs, what will that do for their soul?

That's why the primary purpose and focus of everything we do in worship, and everything we carry out in our ministry must focus on God's Word, with a “Christ for you,” Christ as our Savior priority! Certainly, that focus will also apply to “Christ in you,” and how he motivates us to love our neighbor, and live lives that glorify and thanks him. But God wants us to be a church that really knows Jesus—not a role model or motivational speaker. But ***“the Christ, the Son of the living God!”*** Our Savior and Lord! May that truth from our lips and

hearts change everything in our life, because we know it changes everything for our eternity.