

Three Important Questions

Luke 9:18-26

Pastor John Miller

I want to answer three questions. Number one, who is Jesus Christ? Number two, why did Jesus come? Number three, what does Jesus ask of me?

Why are these questions important? Let me tell you why. If you are wrong about Jesus, you're wrong about God. If you don't know who Jesus Christ is, if you don't have the doctrine of Jesus Christ right—theologians call it "Christology"—then you really don't have God the Father or God the Holy Spirit. In 1 John 2:23, John said, "Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father." So it is absolutely essential that we understand who Jesus is, that we understand why He came, what He did and that we understand what He calls us to be and to do.

The first question is, who is Jesus Christ? The background for that is in verses 18-20. "And it happened, as He..."—that is, "Jesus"—"...was alone praying, that His disciples joined Him, and He asked them, saying, 'Who do the crowds say that I am?'" Jesus was asking His disciples what the popular opinion was of Jesus. "So they answered and said, 'John the Baptist, but some say Elijah; and others say that one of the old prophets has risen again.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered and said..."—and this is the abbreviated version—"...'The Christ of God.'" Peter was saying that Jesus was the Mashiach, the Messiah, "the Christ of God."

In verse 18, notice it says that Jesus was "alone praying." The timing or setting of this is that this was early in Jesus' Galilean ministry. So it was early for Jesus to begin revealing Himself and to describe the reason He came, but He wants the disciples to understand these important issues: who He was, why He came and what it means to follow Him. Those are the same issues we need answers to today.

Jesus had just multiplied the bread and the fish in feeding the 5,000. They are now way to the north, in the area of Caesarea-Philippi. There is the base of Mount Hermon where the water comes out and flows into the Jordan River. It is a beautiful, high-altitude area. It is an amazing place where Peter confesses that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God."

Now this is just a footnote that I want to draw your attention to. Of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Luke emphasizes the humanity of Jesus more than any of the others. Matthew says, "Behold your King"; Mark says, "Behold the Servant"; Luke says, "Behold the Man"; and John says, "Behold your God." So Luke's focus is prayer—seven times in Luke's Gospel. Much of the teaching that Jesus gave on prayer is in the Gospel of Luke, because Luke's focus is on Jesus' humanity.

Notice in verse 18 that Jesus asked them a question. He asked, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" The answer came in verse 19, which are the human opinions. "So they answered and said, 'John the Baptist.'" Some thought Jesus was just a great preacher who came to preach

like John the Baptist.

“But some say Elijah.” In the Old Testament, in Malachi 4:5, it says, “I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” He was speaking of the tribulation period, when Elijah will come. This is one of the many reasons why I feel Elijah will be one of the two witnesses during the tribulation who will come back before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

In every Seder feast, the Jews leave an empty chair, because they believe that Elijah is going to show up and introduce the Messiah’s coming. Someday a Jewish family is going to get their minds blown; Elijah will show up and Christ is going to return. So some say Jesus was Elijah.

“And others say that one of the old prophets has risen again.” Some thought He might just be a reformer or just a prophet. Today that is what some believe, as well.

There are all different opinions of mankind as to who Jesus is. Let me give you a little tip: if you want to know who Jesus is, there are four good books you can read: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. If you want to know who Jesus is, ask Jesus who Jesus is. Look at Him yourself. Read the Gospels about who Jesus Christ is. Then when you finish reading those good books, read the book of Acts, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, et al.—read the Bible.

If you want to know who Jesus is, don’t read Time magazine. You don’t want to watch CNN! They’re not going to tell you who Jesus is. And sadly today, on so many college campuses, you don’t want your professors or teachers to try to tell you who Jesus is. You don’t want some guru or some ascended master to try to tell you who Jesus is.

I want to know from the Gospels themselves who Jesus is.

But a lot of people have different ideas of who Jesus is. Here are some examples. Some people think that Jesus never existed. No one of any intelligence can believe that Jesus Christ never existed. Josephus, the Jewish historian, mentions Jesus. Archeology, manuscript evidence, the impact on our culture and human lives evidence that Jesus Christ was a historical figure.

Some think Jesus was just a great moral teacher. He told us to turn the other cheek and to love one another; they believe that Jesus gave all the great moral teachings.

Then there are others who say that Jesus was just a religious leader or a prophet, who was no different than any other prophets. They say He was like Mohammad, Confucius or Buddha or like some other prophets that have come along; He was like many other religious leaders. Take your pick and follow whichever one you want. All paths lead to God—that’s a common misconception today.

But when you really study the life of Jesus, you find that those categories do not exist. For one simple reason: Jesus claimed to be God, and His claims are either true or false. Jesus said

that the works that He did were “the works which no one else did.” Then Jesus died on the Cross, as He said He would, then three days later He rose from the dead. How’s that for topping other prophets?! You can go to their graves, and their bones still lie there. But Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, proving that He is who He said He is—God in human flesh.

So Jesus Christ is more than just a prophet. He’s more than just a man. He’s more than just a good teacher. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through Me,” John 14:6.

We want to understand who Jesus is, and for that, we want to know who the apostles said He was. Jesus pressed His disciples and asked them, in verse 20, “But who do you say that I am?” It’s not enough to know what the opinion of Jesus is; what’s important is who you believe that Jesus is. “Peter answered and said, ‘The Christ of God.’”

What does Peter mean by “the Christ of God”? He means, “Jesus, You are the Messiah.” He meant that Jesus was the Mashiach, the anointed of God, the promised Son of David, who will sit upon the throne and reign for ever and ever. This is the abbreviated version; the fuller version is in Matthew 16:16, where Peter says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

The word “Christ” in the New Testament is equivalent to the word “Messiah” in the Old Testament. By the way, “Christ” is not Jesus’ last name—Jesus Christ. It is His title. It has the idea of “the anointed one.” That’s what “Messiah” means: “the anointed one.” So all the prophets of the Old Testament spoke of Jesus as the coming Messiah.

I want you to notice that Jesus did not correct Peter. In none of the Gospels did Jesus say, “No, no, Peter; you’re going too far. I’m just a good teacher. I’m no different than Moses or Abraham. I’m no different than anyone else. That’s wrong, Peter, for you to say that.” No; Jesus didn’t correct Peter. As a matter of fact, Jesus commended Peter. After Peter said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” Jesus said, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” Peter wasn’t corrected or rebuked; Jesus accepted what Peter said about Him, because Peter spoke the truth.

So you have, on one hand, human speculation and opinion of who Jesus is, and, on the other hand, you have divine revelation of who Jesus is. Psalm 19:1 says, “The heavens declare the glory of God.” The Word of the Lord is the revelation of God, and God reveals Himself in creation or nature. God cannot be known except by revelation. And the greatest revelation of God is in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:1 says, “God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds.” So Jesus is the greatest revelation of God the Father.

I like to describe Jesus as the God-man. When Jesus was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary, humanity was fused together with deity for all eternity in one Person, Jesus Christ.

Theologians use the term “hypostatic union” for it. It means two natures in one person. This is the orthodox teaching of who Christ is: He is fully God and fully man. And His full deity did not diminish His full humanity; His full humanity did not diminish His full deity. So Jesus was God and man in one person.

The descriptive terms for Jesus is that He was a prophet, a priest and a king. He was a prophet in that He reveals God to us. He's a priest in that He brings us back to God. He's the King, as He will sit upon the throne and rule for ever and ever; He's King Jesus. He is the Lord Jesus Christ, the God-man, who came from heaven, took on flesh, lived a sinless life and died on the Cross in a substitutionary death.

The following verses give more insight into who the Apostles say that Jesus is. John 1:1 is one of the great verses of the Bible. It says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” This verse tells us three things. Number one, Jesus is eternal. “In the beginning was the Word”; Jesus always has been and always will be. There is no time that Jesus did not exist. Number two, Jesus is the personal God. “And the Word was with God.” The word “with” means “face to face.” You can't understand Jesus unless you understand the Trinity. There is God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit; one God, one essence divine in three Persons. So Jesus was with the Father, face to face. Number three, Jesus is divine. “And the Word was God,” or “God was the Word,” in the Greek, which is even stronger. So He is eternal, He is personal and He is divine. That's who Jesus Christ is.

So you can't just put Jesus on the level with other people, with other prophets or with other religious teachers.

In Colossians, Paul says that Christ should have “preeminence.” A lot of people want to give Him prominence, but the Bible says He is to have preeminence. “Preeminence” in the dictionary means “to have no equal, no one above, the greatest.” So the greatest, most exalted thoughts you could ever have about Jesus are not too high.

Jesus is God manifested in the flesh. In John 1:14, the Word that was eternal, personal and divine, “flesh became,” in the Greek. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” So Jesus is the incarnate Word.

Philippians 2:5-11 is one of the greatest statements on the deity and humanity of Christ. Paul says, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God...”—the Greek word is “morphé”; it means “essence”—“...did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation...”—He emptied Himself not of His deity but of His manifested glory and came to earth—“...taking the form...”—again, the word “morphe”—“...of a bond-servant...”—speaking of His humanity—“...and coming in the likeness of men....He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the Cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every...tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,

to the glory of God the Father.” That’s who Jesus Christ is. Anything less is not the Jesus of the Scriptures.

Jesus said of Himself in John 10:30, “I and My Father are one.” Then the Jews picked up stones to kill Him, so He asked them, “Why are you trying to stone Me?” They said, “Because You, being a Man, make Yourself God.” Now it doesn’t mean that Jesus is the Father, but it means that in essence, Jesus is divine, just as the Father and the Holy Spirit.

I like what Thomas said after Jesus had risen from the dead, in John 20:28. He said, “My Lord and my God!” Share that text with a Jehovah’s Witness when they come to your door. Thomas said, “My Lord...”—which is “Yahweh” or “Jehovah”—“...and my God!” Jesus was Thomas’ “God.” Jesus didn’t say, “No, no, Thomas! That’s blasphemy! Shame on you, Thomas. Bad.” No; Jesus accepted what Thomas said, because Thomas spoke the truth.

I’ve talked to Jehovah’s Witnesses before and they say, “Well, Thomas was so shocked to see Jesus risen that he said, “Oh, my God!” No, that’s not what Thomas was saying. If that was the case, Jesus would have rebuked Thomas. Thomas was actually saying, “You are my Lord! You are my God!” So Jesus accepted what Thomas said to Him at that point.

In Titus 2:13, Jesus is called “our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” I believe both are a reference to Jesus: He is the great God and He is our Savior.

We could go on with many other Scriptures showing who Jesus is. He is the God-man.

Now the second question we want to answer is, why did Jesus come? Why did He come from heaven and take on humanity? So first, the Father had revealed, through Peter, that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Then the answer to this second question is found in Luke 9:21-22: “And He strictly warned and commanded them to tell this to no one...”—it’s early in Jesus’ ministry, so He didn’t want the crowds to know He was the Messiah and set Him up on a throne; He wanted time to minister—“...saying, ‘The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day.’”

So here, Jesus moves from His person—He’s the Messiah, “the Son of the living God”—to His passion—His death by crucifixion and His Resurrection. Jesus is the God-man who came to die.

In verse 22, Jesus has given Himself the title “the Son of Man.” This is Jesus’ favorite title for Himself. This is used by Jesus for Himself more than any other title. It is a Messianic title. It comes from Daniel 7:13, and it points to His humanity. That is significant in our text, because Jesus described His death by crucifixion, and He had to become a man in order to die on the Cross. If He wasn’t a man, He couldn’t die, so He became the God-man. If He wasn’t God, He couldn’t save; if He wasn’t a man, He couldn’t die. So Jesus became the God-man, who could save us by dying for us on the Cross.

Notice, in verse 22, these three things that Jesus “must suffer”: He must “be rejected,” He must “be killed” and He must “be raised the third day.” So in one verse, verse 22, it has His rejection, His Crucifixion and His Resurrection.

Here Jesus is actually revealing to His disciples, who became His Apostles, why He came. He said that He came, He would be rejected by the Jewish leaders and by the nation, He would suffer and die on the Cross, He would be buried and three days later, He would rise from the dead.

Jesus didn’t come just to give us philosophy, to give us good teaching; He came to physically, literally die on the Cross as a substitute for our sin. In Matthew 20:28, Jesus said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” I like that. Jesus Himself tells us why He came. So why did Jesus come? To ransom us or redeem us.

You talk about slavery! We’re all slaves to sin. Jesus came to die and buy us out of the slave market of sin and to set us free. It’s called “redemption.” It’s also the work of reconciliation. So there are two words to hang onto regarding the Cross: redemption—Jesus came to buy us, to redeem us from sin; and reconciliation—Jesus came to bring us back into a relationship with God. If you don’t understand this, you don’t understand the purpose for which Jesus came into the world.

Now we come to the third question, which is in verses 23-26. What does Jesus ask of me? These are three of life’s greatest questions: who is Jesus, why did He come and what does He want or demand of me? “Then He said to them all, ‘If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father’s, and of the holy angels.’”

So Jesus revealed His person, Jesus predicted His passion and now He lays out His principles for discipleship.

What does it mean to follow Jesus? He says “whosoever comes after Me” or “whoever follows Me.” It means whoever believes in Jesus or trusts in Jesus or puts their faith in Jesus. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.” These are all synonyms with different shades of meaning; the idea that I believe in Jesus, I trust in Jesus, I follow Jesus.

You could describe yourself, as a Christian, by saying that “I follow Jesus, I believe in Jesus, I put my faith in Jesus Christ, I’m a disciple of Jesus.” All of these descriptions are terms that describe what it means to be a Christian, a true child of God.

In this section, Jesus is not telling us how to get saved, but He is telling us what happens when we are saved. He’s not telling us the way to salvation; He’s talking about the life of discipleship.

It starts with conversion, it leads to the Cross and commitment and then to following Jesus Christ.

There are three things in verse 23 I want you to see. It's not in the fine print, it's not hidden in His contract. Don't you hate those contracts with little, fine print? You have to make sure you read the whole thing. Jesus doesn't put the cost of discipleship in fine print; it's for everyone to see.

The first thing you need to do is deny yourself. Verse 23 says, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself." This is saying "No" to self.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote an excellent book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, said, "When Christ calls a man, He bids him come and die." Die to yourself. Die to your goals. Die to your ambitions. Die to your desires. Die to your plans.

These are the verses that really impacted me as a young Christian. I had just gotten out of high school and become a Christian. I thought, Now what do I do with my life? Jesus said, "If you're going to follow me, die to self." Now wait a minute! I have plans! I have goals! They weren't very lofty, by the way; my goal was to be a professional surf bum. I just wanted to live on the beach, make surfboards, just make enough to pay the bills and put food on the table and go surf. That's all I cared about doing. Then God got ahold of my heart.

I grew up in church, and I used to hear the song that says, "I'll go where You want me to go. I'll be what You want me to be. I'll say what You want me to say. I'll do what You want me to do." I've never forgotten those words. I began to sing that hymn that I learned as a young boy. I said, "God, I'll go where You want me to go—I hope it's not Barstow. I'll be what You want me to be—I hope it's not a preacher. I'll do what You want me to do. I'll say what You want me to say."

Oh, man! God took me up on that commitment; He called me to ministry. He called me to preach His Word! What a glorious life it has been preaching His Word these many, many years.

How wonderful it is to say, "God, You redeemed me. You reconciled me. You bought me; I'm not my own. I've been bought with a price."

If you're a Christian, your life is not yours. You were a slave; you were held in bondage to sin. Jesus gave His life on the Cross to redeem you, to reconcile you. How then can you not place your all on the altar of sacrifice? How can you not "present your body as a living sacrifice" and say, "God, have Your way"?

You should pray that whether you are married or not married. Especially if you haven't gotten married yet, you need to pray that. Pray that God will guide you and lead you. And even if you don't yet have a career path, or even if you are in the midst of a career, pray that God will guide you and lead you. Pray, "God, what do You want me to do? Where do You want me to go? What do You want me to be? How do You want me to represent You?" I think it's every Christian's responsibility to say, "Lord, I am Yours. Have Your way in me," which means to die to

yourself. Your goal, your ambitions and your plans you give to Jesus.

The second step is to take up your cross daily. Notice it in verse 23. This is the cost of discipleship. You have the commitment and the cost. What does it mean to “take up [your] cross daily”? There is a lot of preaching and teaching on “my cross to bear,” but it’s not really what the Bible means by “take up [your] cross.” Some people think that my cross to bear is enduring a mother-in-law who is not very kind to me. “My wife doesn’t really cook for me,” or “I have this pain in my body” or “I have this difficulty or hardship.” That’s not your cross to bear.

Your cross to bear directly relates to your commitment to Christ and the price you pay for following Him. The cross you bear is the pain you endure, the hardships you suffer, because you have decided to live for Christ, to follow Christ and to serve Christ. So when you are ostracized, mocked, ridiculed, put down or passed over for promotion because you are a Christian professor or Christian teacher, that is your cross to bear. Take that cross up. You live in the shadow of the cross; you identify with the crucified Savior.

Amy Carmichael said, “Could he have followed far who has no wound nor scar?” Jesus has wounds in His feet. Are your feet wounded? Jesus has scars in His hands and head. Are yours scarred for the sake of Christ?

You say, “Well, that’s kind of a depressing, sad thought. I give my life to God and Christ and I’m going to suffer?!” Yes; the world’s not going to applaud you. The demons in hell aren’t going to stand up and say, “Yea!” No; you’re going to come under attack and opposition, sometime from family and friends. They’ll say, “You’re doing what?! You’re following who?! You have potential. Don’t give your life to Jesus!” How sad that sometimes people want to hinder us from living for Christ or selling out completely our lives to serving Jesus Christ.

In taking up your cross daily, I see four things: it’s personal—you must take up your cross, and no one can do it for you; it’s painful—we suffer for Christ’s sake, but if we bear the cross, we will wear the crown; it’s practical—daily or every day and perpetually; and it’s joyful. Yes, I said “joyful.”

I like what the saintly Samuel Rutherford said about the Cross of Christ. He said, “The Cross of Christ is the sweetest burden that I could ever bear. It is a burden to me such as wings to a bird or sails to a ship, to carry me forward to my harbor. When you lay aside personal goals, desires, ambitions, that is when God will reveal the desires, ambitions and goals that He has for you. That is what the Apostle Paul meant when he said, ‘I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but now Christ lives in me.’” So you deny yourself, you take up your cross, identify with Christ—be willing to suffer for His cause and His name.

The third step is that you follow Christ. This is a life of continual, ongoing obedience; it’s obediently following Christ wherever He leads. The words “deny himself, and take up his cross daily,” in verse 23, are what is called “the aorist tense” in the Greek. That means it was a past experience that happens to carry over into the present. But the words “follow Me” are in the

present tense. That means habitually, ongoing, continually present your body to God; you're following Jesus every day. So you set aside yourself, you take up your cross to suffer for Christ and you joyfully, willingly say, "I'll obediently, continually, daily follow You."

So my question to you is, have you done that? You say, "Well, I did it years ago, but since then, I've kind of wandered off the path. I don't really live for Him; I've started living selfishly. I don't really pay a price to follow Jesus Christ. I'm not really following Him daily." Then you need to reconsecrate and rededicate your life to God.

If the Spirit of God is speaking to you today, I'm going to ask you to ask yourself—be honest with yourself—have you denied yourself, have you taken up your cross every day and are you following Him every day? Wherever He goes, wherever He leads, are you following Jesus Christ?

You ask, "But why should I do that? Why should I give my life to follow Jesus Christ?" The answer follows in our text; Jesus gives three reasons, in closing. Verses 24-26 all start with the word "for," meaning that He is giving us the rationale or reason why we should deny ourselves, why we should take up our cross and why we should follow Him.

Reason number one is in verse 24. "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake..."—that's the key—"...will save it." This is the paradox of discipleship: if you try to save your life, you're going to lose it; if you do what you want, when you want, go where you want, how you want, you're going to miss life. But if you give your life, for Christ's sake, you will find it.

In another Gospel, it says that "if you lose your life for My sake, you shall find it." So the idea is that we find life by losing our life, but if we try to find life, in our own way, then we'll lose the life that God has for us.

The second reason why we should follow Jesus is in verse 25. It says, "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost?" Jesus is saying, "What good does it do if you live your life to gain all the riches of this world, all the power and popularity, but then you die and go to hell?" Big deal.

Have you seen that bumper sticker a few years ago that said, "He who dies with the most toys wins"? I don't think so. The person who wins is the person who lives for Christ, because "to die is gain." If you don't live for Christ, when you die you have the greatest loss, eternal loss.

Jesus is talking about hell here. Jesus is saying that "You can gain the whole world, but if you lose your soul, it profits you nothing." This is God's profit and loss bookkeeping. So He says that you should be willing to give up the treasures of this world, let the world pass you by, in order to gain the treasures that are eternal.

All that is seen is temporal. So if you are living for everything that you can see, it's temporal. But what is unseen is eternal. Live for the eternal. Get your focus on eternity; live for God.

Give your life, find life. You can gain the whole world, but if you lose your soul, it profits you nothing.

Reason number three why we should follow Jesus is in verse 26. "For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels." Jesus Christ is coming back. And when He comes back, you don't want to be ashamed of Him. You don't want to be ashamed of Him now, and you don't want Him to be ashamed of you when He returns and comes back in power and glory. Jesus Christ is coming again.

I like the song by Elizabeth Kipling, Beneath the Cross of Jesus. She wrote these words:

"I take, O Cross, thy shadow

From my abiding place;

I ask no other sunshine than

The sunshine of His face;

Content to let the world go by,

To know no gain nor loss,

My sinful self my only shame,

My glory all the Cross."

What a beautiful song. What beautiful words.

Who is Jesus? He's God in the flesh. Why did He come? To die on the Cross to redeem you, to reconcile you back to God. What does He want from us? He wants us to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him.

If you haven't trusted Him, you need to do that today.

Let's pray.