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GOING BEYOND THE SERMON

May 1 - Who Do You Say That I Am?

May 8 - Why Worry?

May 15 - Can You Drink the Cup?

May 22 - Do You Want to be Healed?

May 29—What are You Looking For?

Dr. John Stephens

May 1

Who Do You Say That I Am?

BIBLE S.W.A.P.

S-Scripture: Matthew 16:13-15

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴ And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵ He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Notes

W-What Does it Mean and What Can I Obey?

In Matthew’s Gospel, Peter answers Jesus’ life changing question this way:

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah. ²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. (see also, Mark 8:13-20)

Jesus asks his disciples this crucial question at a crucial time in his ministry. He took them to a northern territory called Caesarea Philippi that is located on the slopes of Mount Hermon beside the source of the Jordan River. The waters flow from a grotto-like underground spring surrounded by cliffs. It was a naturally beautiful place that had inspired worship for centuries – of idols, mythological gods, and human rulers. And so, surrounded by false gods, Jesus wants to know if his followers see him as the One, True God. The timing is important because Jesus is facing his impending death. Their lives, spent following him, will not be easy. He needed to know what effect their companionship with him had made on their minds and their hearts. What did they now believe about him, based on their experience with him?

A- Apply

Trevor Hudson, in his book “Questions God Asks” states that “our response to the question ‘Who do you say that I am?’ shapes our lives more than our answer to any other question.” The disciples were able to live with Jesus, to hang out with the same people Jesus ministered to, to hear him teach and preach and to witness him heal and restore the

sick. Notice how Jesus takes Peter's confession and shifts the focus from his own mission and ministry and begins to speak into Peter's identity and mission.

We are able to get to know Jesus through Scripture to gain historical knowledge. Yet, as Hudson writes, "We need another kind of knowledge as well – a personal knowledge of who he is from our own experience of him." We need spiritual eyes to see the spiritual truth of Jesus. God initiates this revelation to Peter through his son, Jesus. He will do the same for us.

P-Pray

Jesus, you are the Christ, the Son of God. Give me eyes to see and ears to hear of your mighty acts. Fill my heart with love and trust to surrender my life to you daily." In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Spiritual Exercise

To steep yourself in historical knowledge of Jesus, read or listen to one of the Gospels in one sitting – straight through. We suggest Mark or Matthew, since this story of Jesus' question: "Who Do You Say That I Am?" occurs in both.

Pay attention to how his life unfolds in its different stages.

What did he teach and stand for?

Notice his spiritual practices – how he stayed close to his Father.

At what point does the Gospel shift from action to his coming death?

To steep yourself in personal knowledge of Jesus, take what you recognize in the Gospels as being special about Jesus and bring the story about him together with the story of your own life. For instance, the story of the woman who washes Jesus' feet with her tears, anoints his feet with oil, and dries his feet with her hair is in both Matthew and Mark. This is a story of true devotion and Jesus tells those who observed this act that "she will be remembered" for it. How does this story make you feel? What does extravagant worship look like for you? How would you express your devotion to Jesus given the chance to be with him?

Hudson writes, ""You may struggle to give yourself like this. Do not force yourself beyond what you are able to give. Know that you are not alone in this. It is difficult enough to give oneself completely to someone we see, let alone to someone we cannot see. Genuine surrender seldom happens quickly or without a battle ... Are you willing to embark on this journey of surrender and trust?"

BIBLE S.W.A.P.

S-Scripture: Matthew 6:25-34

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?”

And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”

Notes

W-What Does it Mean and What Can I Obey?

Just before Jesus teaches his listeners to quit worrying, he said, “You cannot serve God and mammon.” For it is material possessions that both the rich and the poor tend to be anxious about. Jesus gets to the nitty gritty stuff of real life when he says do not worry about . . . FOOD . . . DRINK . . . CLOTHES . . . YOUR LIFE. One meaning for the word mammon is “that in which one trusts.” (Oxford Study Bible, NRSV, p. 1860, from the notes on Luke 16:1-9) Jesus knew that all of us are torn between the seen and the unseen, the known and the unknown, the god of this world and the One True God through whom all the families of the earth are named and blessed. When he pronounces, “Do not worry” three times in this passage, you can hear echoes of the angels throughout Scripture who come to reassure terrified folks, “Do not be afraid.”

So, how are we supposed to stop worrying about our lives? Jesus teaches, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” He uses a less-to-greater argument -- comparing the way birds eat, flowers bloom, and grass grows to the effortless, yet magnificent effects of waiting for God to provide. Remember, the Sermon on the Mount describes the Kingdom of Heaven which Jesus is ushering in and which will be fully realized when he returns. Jesus reminds his hearers that believers are citizens of God’s kingdom, and our handling of material possessions can and should reflect our status as the children of a loving God, who is like a heavenly father.

A-Apply

Trusting God requires childlike faith. As we transition from childhood through adolescence and to adulthood, most of us take on the role of provider; not only for ourselves, but for others as well. Instead of seeing ourselves as beloved children who are cared for by our heavenly father, it's easy to begin to see, believe, and trust in the world's system that teaches us to rely on ourselves, get a job, save up for a rainy day, protect the ones we love, and trust in our own abilities.

Jesus states what is REAL: God is our provider. God, our heavenly father, is in charge of a kingdom far greater than what we see with our eyes. God has better treasure, better food, and better clothes for those who seek first the kingdom. God cares for our loved ones. This is a timely word on Mother's Day!

This week, when you and I find ourselves worrying, let's stop for a moment and ask, "What am I afraid of? If I am not trusting God at this moment, then what am I trusting in today?" Let's ask God to help us turn away from worrying about our livelihood and to turn toward the loving, strong providing arms of God.

P-Prayer

God, you created the world and everything in it, including me. Take my worries away and fill my heart with trust in you. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

Spiritual Practice

Make three lists. How does it help you trust God more fully to see what God has given you, what God is caring for on your behalf, and how God wants you to be generous?

My Gifts from God

What God is Protecting

My Gifts to Others

BIBLE S.W.A.P.

S-Scripture: Mark 10:35 – 40

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.”³⁶ And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?”³⁷ And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”³⁸ But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”³⁹ They replied, “We are able.” Then Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized;⁴⁰ but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

Notes

W-What Does it Mean and What Can I Obey?

This passage is the third and final of Jesus’s passion predictions in Mark’s gospel. We studied the first one (Mark 8:13-20) in week one of this series. Taken together with Mark 9:30-37, we see Jesus instructing the disciples about his approaching death. This is important – the pattern is repeated three times. Craig C. Hill, dean of Perkins School of Theology, points out the pattern in his book, “Servant of All.” Each teaching includes 1) True Messiahship 2) False Discipleship and 3) True Discipleship. “True messiahship is thus the pattern for true discipleship. The cross is not the exception; it is the rule,” he writes. (p. 69)

In the first passion prediction, Jesus says his followers must take up their cross daily and follow him. In the second, he says whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all. And in the third, he asks if they are able to drink the cup that he drinks or be baptized with his baptism. Finally, in this exchange he plainly says that whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” The cross is part of the path for any true disciple of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus predicts what his death will be like (see Mark 10:33-34), he “harkens back to the description of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 50:4-9 and 52:12- 53:12, who is insulted, spat upon, beaten and handed over to death ‘for the transgression of my people’ . . . in other words, Jesus was not telling them something they should be utterly unprepared to hear,” writes Hill. And yet, two of the disciples in Jesus’ inner circle, James and John, refuse to listen and stubbornly misunderstand, which is made plain by their request for Jesus to “do for us whatever we ask of you.” To their false discipleship, Jesus replies, “You do not know what you are asking.”

He redirects their desire to be great – if you want to be great in my kingdom, in my way, you must become a servant and a slave.

A-Apply

If you keep reading to the end of Mark 10, you find a bookend to these three passion predictions. The blind beggar stops Jesus and the disciples. Hearing that it was Jesus passing by, Bartimaeus called out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" In the same manner that Jesus called the disciples to himself for further instruction about his death, he also called Bartimaeus to come close. Jesus asks him the same question he had asked James and John. "What do you want me to do for you? The blind man said to him, 'My teacher, let me see again.' Jesus said to him, 'Go, your faith has made you well.' Immediately he regained his sight and followed him on the way."

In stark contrast to the disciples, who remained blind to what was happening to Jesus, the blind man could see and follow Jesus. In what ways are you blind to the message of Jesus and his call to follow him?

P-Prayer

Jesus, you are the Messiah, the Son of Man. Help me to see you clearly and trust in you when I am called to serve others. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Spiritual Practice

Try applying the passion prediction pattern to your own life.

True Messiahship. Write a statement that expresses who Christ is based on your reading thus far.

False Discipleship. Record a time when you misunderstood Jesus's mission and message? Was your action based on ignorance or deliberate disobedience?

True Discipleship. Make notes about a time when you followed Christ even though obedience required sacrifice on your part.

Pay attention to the opportunities you have this week to practice this pattern. Notice your attitude toward Jesus, your tendency to ignore his call, and your willingness to follow him.

May 22

Do You Want to Be Healed?

BIBLE S.W.A.P.

S-Scripture: John 5:1-5

After this there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.

² Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. ³ In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵ One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, “Do you want to be made well?”

Notes

W-What Does it Mean and What Can I Obey?

The pool of Bethsaida was a well-known healing place in Jerusalem – not just for Jews. The belief was that when the waters were stirred up, the first person who made it in the water would be healed. It is thought that while the pool was popular, it was not successful in practice. Like the paralyzed man in this story, years would go by without the hopeful who waited there being healed.

Jesus *sees* and man and *knows* that he has been there a long time. (v. 6) Jesus’ question, “Do you want to get well?” offers hope that this man can live beyond paralysis. He wants to know if the man wants to change. Not being paralyzed will require him to change his way of life that is dependent on others.

As you read the whole story in John 5:1-18, you see that after the man makes his excuses, Jesus gives him the direct order to take up his mat and walk. As Trevor Hudson writes in “Questions God Asks Us,” “Despite the paralytic’s initial resistance toward the challenge of change, Jesus yearned to liberate him. . . Notice how this instruction was specifically aimed at encouraging the paralytic to live more freely and fully beyond his paralysis.”

And the encouragement from Jesus did not stop there. Later that day, on the Sabbath, the man who was healed testified to the miracle he experienced, but he did not know who Jesus was. Jesus found him in the temple and said to him, “See, you have been made well! Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you.” His journey with Jesus was just beginning and it encompassed total healing.

A-Apply

Hudson finds three possible meanings to Jesus’ question. First, the question points us toward the freedom that Jesus offers. The freedom that Jesus is offering is different from the freedom that the world offers (self-help books, television programs, worldly philosophies, political theories). Like the pool’s limited effectiveness, the world’s freedoms find many of us living in fear, depression, despair, addiction, meaninglessness, and the inability to get along with the people we love the most. God sent Jesus to make available a new freedom to live, love and serve. Jesus’s question “Do you want to get well?” brings with it the hope that we can be set free from whatever is holding us captive.

Second, Jesus’s question “Do you want to get well?” confronts us with the challenge of change. Let’s take another look at the paralytic and what was going through his head when Jesus asked him this question. Am I really willing to let go

of my current way of life? After all, he had people who fetched and carried for him, who fed him and took care of him. He didn't have to take responsibility for his life. So, Jesus wanted to know if he wanted to get well or if he wanted to remain sick.

Third, Jesus's question "Do you want to get well?" points us to the risk of obedience. When the paralytic immediately obeyed Jesus's command, he was taking a great risk. Imagine what was going through his head at that moment (What happens if I fall? How will I cope with not begging for a living? Can I trust this man's word?) And yet, he did what we encourage on the faith journey: take your next step. Like other miracles recorded in Scripture, the combination of God's power and the willingness of the recipient to demonstrate faith results in healing.

P-Pray

God, I give you permission to ask me if I want to get well. Speak to my heart, and hear my fears around change. Help me take my next step of obedience that leads to freedom. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Spiritual Practice

Will you sit with Jesus' question, "Do you want to get well?"

Start by asking yourself where you feel paralyzed in life. It will help to find someone that you can honestly share the struggle that you are currently experiencing. Ask someone to pray for you as you identify what needs healing in your life.

Are you willing to confront the challenge of change? Are you willing to stop blaming others, circumstances, the world and take responsibility for the person that God wants you to become?

Does change for you mean letting go of bitterness you are carrying, saying you are sorry, reaching out to someone that you have shut out, walking away from an abusive situation, breaking the silence of a secret, or some other paralyzing situation?

What risk of obedience does God want you to take? As you sit with this story, ask God to give you a thought that suggests a creative and life-giving way of moving forward. God will always point you toward the possibilities of new freedom. Write down what you think God may be saying to you and speak to God about it. Are you willing to get up and begin to walk again?

May 29

What Are You Looking For?

S-Scripture: John 1:35-49 (NIRV)

The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. He saw Jesus walking by. John said, "Look! The Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this. So they followed Jesus.

Then Jesus turned around and saw them following. He asked, "What do you want?"

They said, "Rabbi, where are you staying?" Rabbi means Teacher.

"Come," he replied. "You will see." So they went and saw where he was staying. They spent the rest of the day with him. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon.

Andrew was Simon Peter's brother. Andrew was one of the two disciples who heard what John had said. He had also followed Jesus. The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon. He told him, "We have found the Messiah." Messiah means Christ. And he brought Simon to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon, son of John. You will be called Cephas." Cephas means Peter, or Rock.

The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me."

Philip was from the town of Bethsaida. So were Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one whom Moses wrote about in the Law. The prophets also wrote about him. He is Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked.

"Come and see," said Philip.

Jesus saw Nathanael approaching. Here is what Jesus said about him. "He is a true Israelite. Nothing about him is false."

"How do you know me?" Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree. I saw you there before Philip called you."

Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God. You are the king of Israel."

Notes

W-What Does it Say and What Can I Obey?

“What are you looking for?” is Jesus’s first question in the Gospels. Other translations read, “What do you want?” or “What do you seek?”

Reading this passage in dialogue form helps us see the layers, depth, and movement Jesus suggests to those who would follow him. In both conversations in this passage, the disciples answer Jesus’ questions from their intellect first. In other words, they start with the head, rather than the heart. This is a good place to start with Jesus – he is the Messiah; he is the one predicted by the law and prophets; he is the one to which the genealogies point. He is the King of Israel. Notice, however, that Jesus doesn’t intend to leave his followers (then or now) with just the facts about who he is. He is interested in inviting them and us on a heart journey. He does this by seeing the disciples, calling them to follow him, giving them new, expansive, meaningful names, and promising to open heaven to them. To follow Jesus, their hearts must be open.

A-Apply

Jesus’ invitation to the two disciples urged them to listen to their hearts, discover what they desired most and to ask for what they wanted.

We are often more comfortable staying in our heads, thinking our thoughts, gathering more information about ourselves, our circumstances, our knowledge about God. Many of us have not allowed the time that it takes to listen to our heart’s desires, or we don’t trust what we might find. Hudson describes this lack of connection to the heart: “We cheat ourselves out of living a life marked by depth, wonder and passion. We miss out on intimate relationships with God and other people. Even in the midst of our outwardly successful and affluent lives, we have still not found what we are looking for. (P. 76)

To connect with our desires, we must ask: What do I desire most? This is hard to do because we have so many desires. Some are superficial and some are so deep that they feel too precious to name. As you begin to get in touch with your deepest desires, you will begin to move from the intellectual approach to yourself and God to the heartfelt stance or way of being with God and yourself.

The third challenge posed by this question is to ask for what you want. This is hard for some of us who express our faith mostly through service to others or cling to the belief that human desires are mostly in conflict with God’s will. This is deserving of careful thought. Jesus’s question shows us clearly that God *is* concerned about our desires. “God wants us to listen to the desires of our hearts, to befriend them, to understand them, and then to ask for what we want. Whatever our longings may be, God really is interested,” writes Hudson (p. 80) If this is hard for you, will you trust God with this change of belief and practice?

P-Prayer*

Lord, here are my real longings. Please show me those that reflect your heart and those that don’t. Help me to turn from destructive desires, and give me the courage to follow those that will genuinely bring me alive. In Jesus’ Name I pray. Amen.

Spiritual Practice

One way to get in touch with your deepest desires is to write your own eulogy. Imagine that you have died, and someone writes your eulogy for the memorial service. What would you really like people to say about you? As you are writing your eulogy, be sure that it fulfills your deepest desires. Also think about the way that you are living your life now and what you are currently pursuing that you would not want included in your eulogy. You do not need to share this with anyone. Where you see dissonance between your current life and the life you want to live, will you offer this to God and ask God to help you sift through the places of discontent or disconnection?

*Prayer by Trevor Hudson in “Questions God Asks Us,” p. 82.

More Than a Question

Jesus commonly asked questions as a method of spiritual teaching. Jesus did not ask “gotcha” questions that set up the question’s receivers to be rebuked or chastised. Rather, Jesus asked questions in order to aid the growth of those to whom the questions were intended. He probed the faith, understanding, and experience of persons around him in order to help them know themselves better . . . to see the limitations of their present faith . . . and their need to move onward in their depth of communion with him and with the Father.

Going Beyond the Sermon

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Going Beyond the Sermon notes are written by Teresa Rossy, Chapelwood’s Director of Adult Discipleship,.



11140 Greenbay

Houston, TX, 77024

www.chapelwood.org (713)354-3467