

Discipleship Class: Midterm Exam
Luke 9:18-27

Introduction:

Sometimes we are not completely sure what we believe until we are forced into a situation where we either believe it or not, when there is no upside in faking it, and where there's no upside in wavering. It's the old "faith fall", where you say you are sure your friends will catch you if you fall backwards, but test it by actually falling. Or believing your teenage driver with a permit is ready for the freeway but actually getting in the car. This past week I talked with a friend of mine who experienced the possibility of death this last year when a routine surgery went bad. He had his gall bladder out, but there was potential of infection, so a drainage tube was added, which lacerated his intestine and led to sepsis. This meant surgery to try to flush the infection and waiting to see if his body would fight off the infection. He said he laid there with friends, pastors, and his wife and said his last reflections and thanks, and said he was actually calm facing death. We laughed together as we reflected back on the gladness of actually living out what he said he believed since he was saved. Sometimes we don't know what we believe until we are tested.

This morning we follow the narrative of Jesus as He prepared His disciples for life without Him, and He tested them to make sure they knew WHO they were following and WHAT they were getting into. In the same way, we are tested to consider what we truly believe.

Reviewing the material

- **The setup**

Jesus had primed the 12 for this test. As any good teacher does, material is given, it is repeated, it is shown and experimented with, then it is reviewed before a test is given. Tests can come in all different forms. Some come in written form (I actually liked the old "blue book" tests that you could dump a lot of information as opposed to Scantron's where it was a bubble only, without the ability to quantify an answer). Some tests are shown, like a field test or a surgery. Others are orally given and answers must be verbalized. Most people invariably do not like tests, but we know they are a valid way to quantify what a person has understood, what they learned, and if given properly, can help someone crystallize what they actually believe.

This last type of test is what Jesus was doing with His disciples. He had called them, taught them, and shown them who He was. Then he sent them out to interact with the material, to see how people responded, to hear it in their own words. Upon returning, He desired to debrief with them, to review what they had learned, and to build on the foundation He had laid down. This led up to their functional midterm review, one that was simple enough (only had 2 questions), they didn't need to study, and it was pass/fail. Passing meant continuing on with Christ. Failure meant they would no longer walk with Him, like so many others.

- **The skipping**

I mentioned last week that there is a gap in between verses 17 and 18 in chapter 9. These gaps are important, not just in what is missing but in **why** it is missing. There are **7 important events** in Jesus' life that Luke does not record, which Mark does (see Mark 6:45-8:26). This does not lessen the impact on those events, it does show that Luke, the skilled author who was inspired by the Spirit to write, was showing a different emphasis that Jesus was teaching the disciples, and us. In Luke's record, He shows that Herod Antipas asked an all important question about Jesus: **who is this about whom I hear such things?** (Luke 9:9) At first glance it seems incongruous and out of place. But notice what Luke does. Herod asks the question, and Jesus answers it in the next section: He is Lord of Creation, able to make 5

loaves of bread into enough to feed the Staples Center (Col. 1:16-17). He then skips some other events to follow this most important theme for the disciples: **who is Jesus**. Based on what they were needed to do, based on the obstacles in front of them, and based on the assurance that it brings, the disciples needed to be able to ace this test: **who is Jesus**.

By extension, we ourselves see that this is such an important question for us. Who we believe Jesus to be shapes our life, our death, our finances, our time, our commitments, our joy, and our view of success. The test questions are short, simple, and to the point, but they are absolutely a matter of life, and even death.

Test questions posed (18-20)

Luke 9:18-20 Now it happened that as he was praying alone, the disciples were with him. And he asked them, "**Who do the crowds say that I am?**"¹⁹ And they answered, "John the Baptist. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen."²⁰ Then he said to them, "**But who do you say that I am?**"

- **Who do people say that I am?**

Notice first that Jesus was *praying alone* before He gave the test. He prayed like this at His baptism, before choosing the 12, and before His coming transfiguration. Jesus seeking the Father in prayer before this signals its importance. We are not sure what He prayed, but it's possible it had to do with wisdom in asking the questions, and grace to enlighten the hazy and often muddled minds of His followers. This was a little like our teachers who pray before their students take their AP tests (please pass, please pass, please, please, please...)

Jesus began the test by asking what the **public opinion** was of Jesus. What do others around you say that I am? Their responses were very similar to those posed to Herod Antipas.

John the Baptist - John came with power and authority, was well liked by the people, and it would not be out of the realm of possibility that he would have raised from the dead, since he was unjustly put to death (it would make for good drama for him to exact revenge on those who killed him)

Elijah - Elijah would make sense since Jesus healed and raised people from the dead in similar fashion. Elijah was not only a well known and powerful OT figure, but to have him come back would signal God's favor again, and possible freedom from tyranny

Prophet - Again, if He were one of the OT prophets risen again, this would signify God's silence broken and hope for the future. It is interesting that all of the followers of Islam today still would hold that Jesus was/is a prophet, the greatest of all prophets, but not God. This moves the reality from one of positive affirmation to grossly missing the point.

What do people say today?

Fictional or made up character -

This is a heresy that has spanned the decades and continues to gain traction today. In 1959 Dr. Albert Schweitzer penned *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* and said, "*The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as Messiah, who preached the ethic of the Kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of heaven upon earth, and died to give His work its final consecration, never had any existence. He is a figure*"

designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in an historical garb.¹

This deconstructionist thought was picked up by "scholars" of the Jesus Seminar, which dispels the truth that Jesus ever existed. Jesus is a myth, a legend, a figment of our conscious hope in humanity, no different than Luke Skywalker or the Force. Whether or not people can articulate this, the fact remains that many would not give credence to the fact of Jesus' historicity nor truth claims.

Moral teacher -

This group, much like the people of Jesus' day, believe Jesus to be real and actually like Jesus. Seriously, who wouldn't like a man who taught to love, who fed the hungry and hung out with prostitutes and tax collectors. We like that guy. He would support whatever social work we do and even whatever political party we supported. However, even coming to a mental ascent to "believe" that Jesus existed is not enough to save.

John 12:36-43 gives us clues as to **why people do not want to come to grips with who Jesus really is.**

The **first:** It is not a *lack of information*, since there were many in Jesus' day that saw the miracles and still rejected (John 12:36-37). This was because continual rejection led to the judicial hardening of their hearts so they could not believe (John 12:38-40)

The **second:** even when those DID believe Him, *"for fear of the Pharisee's they did not confess it (openly), so that they would not be put out of the synagogue, for they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God."* (John 12:42-43)

This is a pivotal understanding of rejection. It is not that people don't want Jesus, they simply don't want to give up what they have in this life! Whether the glory they crave is what comes from mankind or the inventions of mankind, when that desire is greater than the glory of God, there will always be rejection of who Jesus really is.

- **Who do you say that I am?**

Much like Joshua with the people of Israel in Joshua 24, Jesus wanted to make sure that the disciples knew all the options to the answer to the test. They were to look at all the possibilities of Jesus' identity and choose. This was to make sure there was no wavering, no second guessing, and nothing nebulous in the answer. When He asked the question, the language makes it clear the emphasis of the test question was: **what about YOU, who do YOU say that I am!**

NOTE: It is important to remember that our faith ALWAYS comes down to this. It is not our parents, our heritage, or our church. It is not a claim of sin in general, or Jesus in general, or God in general, but we must personally come to grips with the fact of our **own sinful depravity, our need for a Savior, faith in the man Jesus Christ who died in our place, rose again, and reconciles us with the Father.** There are no cheat sheets, no Cliff's Notes, and no one can answer for us. We must all stand before the Lord one day and answer this same question, and Peter answered it well.

Right answer given (20)

And Peter answered, "The Christ of God."

- **The Christ of God**

¹ Kent Hughes, Luke, p. 338.

In a four word answer (this goes against all of my test taking principles, btw), Peter, as representative, gave a clear answer to the question, and it was a good one. His answer recognized that Jesus was the **Christ, the Messiah or anointed one**. This meant that Peter recognized that Jesus was far more than a prophet, far beyond a powerful teacher, and was actually the long awaited Messiah. In fact, Jesus was so impressed by this answer that He said, "**Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood have not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.**" (Matt. 16:17). It is the same today that it is God who lifts the veil of our eyes and softens our hearts to see Jesus as He really is, the Messiah who saves His people from their sins.

New Lesson built (21-22)

Luke 9:21-22 And he strictly charged and commanded them **to tell this to no one**,²² saying, "The Son of Man must **suffer** many things and be **rejected** by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be **killed**, and on the third day be **raised**."

- **An unusual command**

Jesus was adamant, and said in no uncertain terms "**Tell no one**". This must have come as a shock, especially since Jesus had told them that even the gates of Hades could not prevail against the church that they were to build on this Messiah (Matt. 16:18). But it was not time to let that message out until something else had been accomplished.

- **New information given**

On this side of the cross, it seems like this should have been clear information: Jesus was going to the cross, He would be handed over, would be killed and would rise again. But we must remember at this point, this would have shocked the disciples into numbness (Actually, Peter famously said it would never happen on his watch, and Jesus rebuked him and told to "get behind me Satan" Matt. 16:22-23). This was the first time Jesus explicitly gave the disciples this amount of detail, because this was the first time they could handle it. Jesus did not simply come to heal disease and feed the poor, but something of infinitely greater value: **He would have to go to Jerusalem, would suffer, and give Himself as ransom for many**. In order for the disciples to grapple with this information, they had to be secure knowing He was Messiah.

Class expanded (23-27)

Luke 9:23-27 And he said to all, "If anyone would come after me, let him **deny himself** and take up his **cross daily** and **follow me**."²⁴ For whoever would **save** his life will lose it, but whoever **loses** his life for my sake will **save** it.²⁵ For what does it **profit** a man if he **gains** the whole world and **loses** or **forfeits himself**?²⁶ For whoever is **ashamed** of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.²⁷ But I tell you truly, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God."

- **An audience opened up**

After completing that portion of the test, Jesus turned from the 12 to a larger group, one that Mark referred to as the **multitudes** (Mark 8:34). This was crucial information for all those who truly followed Jesus, and is still crucial information.

- **The necessity of the cross**

The cross is obviously a central feature of what we believe, and we embrace the fact that Jesus had to die on it, even if it means it loses some of what should appall. The cross, which we often wear on a chain or have hanging on the outside of buildings, was an instrument of extreme torture and public

death that was used as a deterrent to any further rebellion. When Jesus mentions a cross here, it would have created an immediate reaction (like if I mentioned "follow me to the firing squad"). The cross was not simply a means of corporal punishment, it was the absolute worst kind. This is what was so shocking about this statement: **to follow Christ we must not only embrace Him dying on the cross, but accept the reality of the cross for ourselves.** What does this mean for us?

Radical self-denial - In a world of "self", Jesus calls out the most extreme view of self yet. Instead of self reliance, self-centeredness, or self-fulfillment, the path of discipleship is paved with self-disownment, a denial and rejection of ourselves being the center of the universe. Let this sink in for a bit. How much of our life is centered on ourselves, how much time, thought, effort, and energy is used to elevate ourselves, either by position, power, feeling, or comfort? We are bombarded with the call to make a better life for ourselves now, to make time for me, to love ourselves more. Jesus made it abundantly clear that what truly leads to life, and that abundantly, is when self is abandoned. This means our life in Christ is no longer about us, but about Christ, about the gospel, and about others, and that affects every aspect of our life, every day.

Bear the cross - Luke is the only gospel author who mentions this command as "daily", but the rest infer as much. We are to follow the example of our Savior who was willing to march toward certain death by bearing His cross. This is a natural progression from self-denial. When we realize that life is no longer about us but about Christ, then our **willingness to embrace suffering, rejection, persecution, and even death flows from our renouncement of self.** This means that a "cross" is more than the normal frustrations of life (a crabby neighbor, the guy who cuts you off on the way to work, the snotty customer), but a willingness to lay our life down daily to yielded service to the glory of God. This is why Paul writes later in 2 Corinthians 4:17 that **"momentary light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comprehension."** Peter wrote that we can suffer with joy (1 Pet. 4:12-19), because we follow Christ through suffering.

Jesus does not mince words here. A life of relative ease and comfort is an anomaly, not the norm. Facing external suffering and death, and a willingness to face it, is the cost of the cross.

Follow Jesus - As a good leader, Jesus does not call us to something He was not willing to do, but to follow His example. This does not mean our obedience is the REASON for our salvation, but rather the RESULT. We follow Jesus in the foolishness of the gospel, the counter-cultural nature of truth, and an embracing of having people hate us when we live in the light.

- **The logic of the cross**

Jesus' last statement is logical and sequential. Following Jesus is **loss** in this world but **gain** in the next, and you cannot have it both ways. The logic is sound: we either strive for a "life" in this world, looking for pleasure, satisfaction, and something to worship in this world, or we die to all of that for the sake of knowing Christ. Sometimes we put the gain of this world into the 1%, its just those who have sold out everything to gain money and fame no matter the cost. But mostly this means people who simply live for the weekend, for retirement, for the next thing, to have enough money, to put our kids in college, and not mess up too bad. We are content with little and are convinced this is gain and is worth giving up Christ now and forever.

Notice this does not mean simply embracing asceticism and denial is of any value in and of itself. It is of value when we **lose our life for His sake alone.** In other words, the object of our losing in this life is Christ, because HE IS WHAT WE GAIN!

Living for ourselves, for the riches of this world or the pleasures of this world means we are ashamed of being losers in this world. The recourse is that God will be ashamed of us when He returns in glory,

shutting us out from His presence. So we determine not to be ashamed of the gospel, knowing that it is the power of salvation for all who believe.

Jim Elliot, the famed missionary who gave his life to reach the Auca Indians of S. America said this about this concept:

"He is no fool to give what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

"Father, take my life, yea my blood if Thou wilt, and consume it with Your enveloping fire. I would not save it, for it is not mine to save. Have it, Lord, have it all. Pour out my life as an oblation for the world. Blood is only of value as it flows before Your altar."²

The final exam question: *Who do we say Jesus is?* Can we answer that question decisively, confidently, while applying it to our life? This is the most important question ever posed, and our answer determines our future.

Closing thoughts and questions:

- What are some other false ways (besides what was written above) that people think about **the person of Jesus** and the **nature of following Him**?
- What are the practical implications of **denying self**? What areas do we see ourselves focused wrongly on "self"?
- What does it mean daily to embrace the concept of bearing our cross? How does that help us face each day?
- What are areas that we try to gain in this life? What things do we need to lose?

² Elisabeth Eliot, *Shadow of the Almighty*, p. 55.