

Life's Ultimate Question

Matthew 16

Guest preacher: Dr. Lloyd John Ogilvie

Sunday, July 12, 2009

Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

What are your deepest hopes and hurts? Fondest dreams and desires? Frustrations and fears? Worries and anxieties? Will being here make any difference? Yes! The Living Christ is here! What do you really expect He can and will do for you? Spurgeon was right, "We have great needs, but we have a great Christ for our needs!" The lyrics of a popular contemporary song by Brendan Graham and Rolf Lovland¹ communicate what Christ is ready to do for us and through us:

When I am down and, oh my soul so weary;

When troubles come and my heart burdened be;

Then I am still and wait here in silence,

Until You come and sit awhile with me.

There is no life, no life without its hunger.

Each restless heart beats so imperfectly,

But when You come and I am filled with wonder,

Sometimes, I think I glimpse eternity.

You raise me up so I can stand on mountains,

You raise me up to walk on stormy seas,

I am strong when I am on Your shoulders,

You raise me up to more than I can be.

Is that what you want from the Savior this morning: vision, courage, strength, power to exceed your expectations? Who wouldn't?! And yet, they are all available only to those who are able to answer his ultimate question.

Christ first asked life's ultimate question on the road to Caesarea Philippi. Few places could have provided a more significant locale. Jesus, walking ahead of his disciples, was silhouetted against the city in all its Roman glory. Rising up out of its center was a translucent temple of white marble built by Herod the Great in honor of the Caesars. Around it were magnificent villas and palaces added by Herod's son Philip, who had renamed the city to honor Caesar, and to impress his own name in history! The power of Rome was in the air, but so were the hauntingly vivid memories of worship of the pagan god, Baal—once so powerful in that region. In fact, before Philip renamed it, the city had been called Balinas in honor of the pagan fertility god. Ruins of temples and shrines of Baal orgy worship punctuated the landscape.

Framing the view and overshadowing the region was Mount Hermon, metaphor of Israel's quest for God. Undoubtedly, sharp recollections filled the disciples' minds of the strategic times God had encountered great leaders of Israel on that mountain. On the slope of Hermon a cliff filled with ancient inscriptions and niches containing statues of pagan gods gave stark reminder of the conflict Israel had faced maintaining its monotheism against syncretism, the blending of religions and their gods. It was here in this region of ambiguous symbols of humankind's lust for military might and the religious quest for meaning, that Jesus stopped, turned, and confronted his disciples with a penultimate question, "Who do men say that I am?"

This was not the question of an insecure leader seeking to know his standing in the public opinion polls. It was a probing inquiry designed to determine the extent to which people were discovering his true identity, mission and message.

The answers were really very complimentary. The disciples rehearsed the speculations they had heard. They told Jesus that the fears of Herod Antipas, who murdered John the Baptist, had promoted the theory that he was John raised from the dead. Others believed he fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi that he was Elijah come to prepare the way for the Messiah. Still others surmised that the vision given to Judas Maccabaeus was being realized: he was Jeremiah who had come with a golden sword to wage war for the deliverance of Israel. Others simply said Jesus was one of the prophets.

It was at this significant moment that Jesus pressed home life's ultimate question. Surrounded by geographical and topographical evidences of humankind's longing for an answer to the riddle of life, and in the emotional context of the varied, but false opinions about his real identity, Jesus asked the disciples, "But who do you say that I am?"

Only one could find his voice to answer. It was not a levered response, and it did not come quickly. Simon's response was seasoned by deep thought and motivated by a gift of faith from the Father. His face was radiant and his voice alive with the excitement and

insight as he answered: "You are the Christ." (Matthew's Gospel records the full statement: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Matthew 16:16).

Clearly Simon acknowledged Jesus not as forerunner of the Messianic age, but as the Messiah himself. This had been hinted at before early in the Master's ministry when Andrew and John had announced to Simon that they had found the Messiah. When Simon first met the Master, he had said to him, "You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas (which is translated, a stone)." John 1:42. Now, as a fact of revelation from the Spirit of the Father, in this moment of high spiritual drama, Simon knew for himself that it was true: Jesus was the expected Messiah! And he knew, too, that this beloved and winsome Person with the dust of Palestine on His sandals and the salvation of the world in His heart, was the Son of God.

We too are surrounded by the different ways many people have tried to answer the question about who Christ is. Today people would be quick to answer: he is an historical character...a poetic idealist...a sensitive, but misguided person who is obsolete in our cybernetic, techno-political world...a fine ethical and moral teacher and example... the greatest human being who ever lived. Even among traditional Christians there is some equivocation about who Christ is to us today. Among liberal theologians, the divinity of Christ has been an open question in theological discussions. And in many circles of both clergy and laity a kind of faithless familiarity keeps people from being forthright in answering life's ultimate question.

Also today, when we are so afraid of offending people of other religions, there is an equation that dominates much of our culture: inclusiveness multiplied by relativism equals exclusion. Allow me to explain. In our efforts to be sure we are accepting and affirming of other religions, we tend to end up very vague about our own beliefs. Relativism, which asserts that everything is relative and that there are no absolutes, has had a debilitating impact on our culture, churches, and many Christians.

I like the statement by a Rabbi friend: "You be who you are so I can be who I am!" And I will not soon forget the concern of a Muslim who said, "Don't deny your own beliefs in an effort to be so solicitously accepting of mine that you become unsure of what you believe, because then I'll never know what a real Christian is!" What he was saying was, "Don't include me out!"

In the midst of all the vacillating voices answering Christ's question, "Who do men say that I am?", he comes to each of us and puts the penetratingly personal question, "But who do you, for yourself, say that I am?" Christ is not even satisfied with how we might have answered years ago, but he is most concerned about whom he is to us now. This morning. Right now. How will you answer? Your answer is tremendously important!

Our answer is dependent on our convictions about the authenticity of the biblical account of the life, message, death, and resurrection of Christ. Do you believe that he is who he said he was? He claimed to be the Messiah, the incarnate Son of God, Immanuel, God with us, our Savior and Lord. Robert Browning² presses the point: "What think ye of Christ, friend, when all's done and said; like you this Christianity or not?"

The biblical Jesus is not the Jesus we have created of our own making and faking—an easy-going, good natured Jesus who is on call when we want him to help us deal with our own personal agendas. Having only this culturalized, benevolent, but somewhat weak "errand-boy" Jesus stunts our spiritual growth. "It's a sniveling modern invention," said George Bernard Shaw, "for which there is no warrant in the Gospels."³ And C. S. Lewis focused the issue sharply⁴:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said wouldn't be a great moral teacher. He'd either be a lunatic—on the level of a man who says he is a poached egg—or else he'd be the devil of hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is the son of God, or else a madman or something worse. Christianity, if false is of no importance and if true, of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.

The true biblical Jesus—the robust, challenging Jesus, is more than just a Comforter. He also confronts us, and he will not accept second place in our lives. He calls us to the exhilarating adventure of dynamic discipleship. Though he meets us as we are with incredible grace, he loves us too much to leave us as we've been. The authentic Jesus of the Bible tenderly cares for us when we hurt, but he tenaciously exposes anything that keeps us from being all he intends for us to be. His love and forgiveness are unqualified, but also his demands are unequivocal. He is the Master who holds before us the mandate of the Kingdom of God and is the Lord of all life who calls us to commit all we have and are to him.

This true Jesus spoke what have been called, "hard sayings," hard not because they are difficult to understand, but that they are difficult to live. His ultimate question perhaps is the hardest of all if we want to be absolutely honest in how we answer. "Who am I to you...really?" That cuts like a laser into the core of our being and forces us to evaluate whether our priorities, values and attitudes match a forthright declaration that—for us—Christ is indeed our Lord and Savior.

If he is that to us, he will raise us up to stand on mountains, to walk on stormy seas, to stand with courage on his shoulders and to be so much more than we ever thought we could be. How we answer Christ's ultimate question determines what we will receive from him this morning for the five most urgent needs of our lives.

First, our answer will determine how much we know and experience of God our Father and the Holy Spirit, our source of supernatural power. Jesus clearly declared that he came from the pre-existent Father and the Holy Spirit. He asserted that he was the condescension of divinity and the exaltation of the intended potential of humankind. No feckless guru could pull off a claim like that! Note his own words, "I proceeded forth and came from God; nor have I come of myself, but He sent me" (John 8:42). Awesome. From before creation and measured time, he was a Person in the pre-existent glory circle of the Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He came from his position in this circle of mutual glorification to reveal the Father and promise the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. He continues as reigning Lord and comes to each of us to invite us into that glory circle to know the unqualified love and forgiveness of the Father and the empowering of the Holy Spirit. At one time he is the portrait of the Father and the prototype of what humankind was meant to be and can be, in and through him.

Christ could not have been clearer than he was in his "I am" declaration: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6). It is equally true that the Father continues to come to us in Christ and the Holy Spirit constantly seeks to give us the gift of faith to entrust our lives to Christ. We cannot by-pass Christ to get to God, for God has willed it otherwise. We must come to grips with his message, accept his death as atonement for our sins, believe that he is alive, and dare to live under his lordship. He raises us up to stand on mountains.

Second, how we answer Christ's ultimate question determines our ability to live the abundant life he promised. "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). "Lo, I am with you always" (Matthew 28:20). He sustains us in loneliness and gives us strength in our weaknesses. He gives us guidance in indecision and wisdom in confusion. He raises us up to walk on stormy seas.

True Christianity is not only life as Christ lived it, or life as we live it in him as recipients of the efficacy of the cross and an empty tomb, but life as he lives it in us. "Abide in me and I in you" (John 15: 5). If we can answer Christ's ultimate question with bold conviction, and then invite him to make us his post-resurrection home, the mysterious miracle of a character transplant begins and continues every day of our lives.

That's what Christ promised Simon, the big fisherman, that day at Caesarea Philippi when he answered his ultimate question. In Matthew's account it reads, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:17-18). The disciple was promised a new name that implied a total change of character. No longer vacillating Simon, the son of Jonah, but now a rock-like person, Peter, *petros* in Greek, meaning "rock." In the Greek text, Simon is called *Petros*, but it is upon "this rock" *petra*, meaning a mass of rock, that the church will be built. I think this *petra* is our faith. The church was never to be built on a human personality, but on the rock of faith. When we answer Jesus' ultimate question, claiming him as our Lord and Savior, he gives us a new name and unshakable, massive rock-like faith and uses us to build up his Church.

Third, how we answer Christ's ultimate question determines our ability to receive and give forgiveness. As tools for living the abundant life, Christ offers us the keys of the kingdom: "And 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" (Matthew 16:19). We are given the power to loose or bind people. The authority of absolution is given to everyone who believes in Christ. We can free people with forgiveness or bind them with a refusal to forgive.

This is true in our relationships. Forgiveness was so important to Christ that the phrase in the Lord's Prayer about forgiving our debtors as we have been forgiven our debts was the only one he felt it necessary to stress and explain with urgency: "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15).

What a demanding challenge! We can hold people at the arms length of judgementalism or set them free with forgiveness. The Greek word for forgiveness is *aphesis*, the noun form of the verb *aphiemi*, a compound word combining *apo*, "from," and *hiemi*, "to send." Forgiveness sends away the hurts, the slights and oversights, the anguish and pain of remembered failure—our own and others.

We are reminded of Isaiah's prophecy of the power of Christ as our scapegoat. Drawing on the image of the practice of the scapegoat in Leviticus 16:22, Isaiah wrote, "Surely he has borne our grief and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4). The Hebrew word for "borne" is *nasa*, to lift up, carry away, remove to a distance away, and the word for "carried", *sabal*, means an actual substitution. The sins of the people were pinned onto a goat and it was led out into the wilderness to die. People's sins were carried away and totally removed. Christ, our scapegoat, has taken our sins and carried them away. He continues to do that each time we turn over to Him our unforgiven memories.

His grace is receiving the forgiveness we do not deserve and his mercy is not receiving the punishment we do deserve! And you and I are given the same grace and mercy to share with others. The Lord has given us the power to send away the hurt or harm people have done to us, themselves, and others. Even when we think they don't deserve forgiveness or have never even confessed the need of it from us, we are commanded to forgive. The twist of reality is that if we don't, we too are bound with the hurting memory. As one woman said, "I love myself as loved by Christ too much to not forgive."

This quality of Christly grace is motivated by the fourth result of our answer to Christ's ultimate question. When we answer, committing our lives to him, we are ready to receive the mysterious, but transforming dynamic of the dual cross-- Christ's cross and our own. How we answer his ultimate question, committing our lives to him, determines our experience of the death and resurrection cycle we are called to share with Christ.

That day at Caesarea Philippi, after Peter's confession, Christ's declaration of how he would build his church on those who receive the gift of faith, and the awesome entrusting of the power of absolution, he immediately pressed on to tell his disciples that he must go on to Jerusalem where he would suffer and be killed, but on the third day would rise from the dead. This so shocked Peter that he rebuked the Master and said, "Far be it from You, Lord; this will never happen to you!" (Matthew 16:22). The disciple's new gift of faith did not reach to trust the Lord to this excruciating extent. His protest brought a bracing rebuke from Jesus: "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but of the things of men" (Matthew 16:23).

Satan? But this was Simon Bar-Jona! How could he be called Satan? Jesus knew that Simon didn't simply react out of misguided loyalty or distorted ambition, but that Satan, the dissembler, distresser, and dissuader of people from seeking and doing the will of God had found a viable pawn in volatile, vacillating Simon. Jesus also knew that the most vulnerable time in a new believer in him would be shortly after verbal confession of his or her life. Our greatest temptations come not only in times of discouragement and depression, but following our initial or successive steps in living out our faith.

That's when we need to experience the transforming dynamic of the dual-cross: the mysterious, but open secret of victorious living, the dual cross to face the double crosses of life. "If anyone desires to come after Me," Christ told his disciples, "Let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me." (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8: 34). Christ's cross was the once-never-to-be-repeated, substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of the world. Our cross, however, means our death to self and a resurrection to a totally new life. It also means our surrender of our wills to faithful obedience to seeking and following the guidance of Christ.

We trivialize the cross's true meaning when we say of some situation, difficult person, or physical or psychological problem, "Well, that's my cross!" Not so! The death and resurrection cycle of Christ is recapitulated in us, over and over again. That is why the Apostle Paul said, "I die daily" (1 Cor. 15:31). But he also said, "That I may know Him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, (*pathematon*), being conformed to his death, if by any means, I may attain to the resurrection of the dead...One thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ" (Philippians 3:10-11, 13-14) Those who take up their cross in unreserved surrender of self and death to their own control, are given the life-changing gift of the indwelling Christ.

"Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27), was the Apostle Paul's way of explaining it. His control of his old self had died in his commitment to Christ and now was the riverbed for the flow of Christ's Spirit through him. He wrote about this secret of character transformation to the Galatians: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

We were never meant to be a river of self-generated insight, strength and adequacy; we were meant to be the riverbed for the flow of the character of Christ through our personalities. The fruit of the Spirit is really a description of what we are to expect and express when this magnificent character transplant remakes us in the image of Christ: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22).

Our relationships are radically altered as we live in fellowship with Christ and are the riverbed for the flow of his Spirit. The depth of his love heals us and makes us unselfish lovers of people. Joy, so much greater than mere happiness, radiates from us. A profound peace of mind controls our thinking and makes us peacemakers. The Lord's patience gives us calmness in our struggles. We are amazed at the consistent surge of kindness we feel that makes us affirmers of people. And this newfound character strength has the consistency of Christ's goodness. Just as the Lord's faithfulness never ends, we develop a dependability and indefatigable strength to never give up on other people or frustrating situations. The meekness we experience is not weakness, but the result of living life under the control of the Master. Remarkably, we have greater self-control than we ever thought possible. Christ gives us the strength to fulfill John's challenge, "Anyone who says he is a Christian should live as Christ did" (1 John 2:6 *The Living Bible*). That happens when we admit our need for Christ, submit our lives to Christ, remit our control to Christ, and transmit our love for Christ to others.

Henry Drummond said, "To become Christlike is the only thing in the world worth caring for, the thing before which every ambition is folly and lower achievements vain."⁵ A person who experienced this character transplant said, "I was a sour note on Adam's reed when the Master musician re-orchestrated my life and gave the angels something to sing about!" Indeed, we are strong when we are on his shoulders. Through him we are more than we ever thought we could be! But not just for this portion of our lives on earth, but for the time of our physical death and then forever.

And that brings us to our fifth and concluding point: how we answer Christ's ultimate question determines our courage to face death and where we will spend eternity. Underneath all anxieties is the fear of dying. Not so for us, if we belong to Christ. "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent," (John 17:3) Christ prayed on the night before he was crucified. He went to the cross to defeat the forces of evil and death. He rose from the dead. Death was swallowed up in victory. His promise was fulfilled: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die" (John 11:25-26). Christ followed this liberating promise with another piercing question, "Do you believe this?" Well, do you? Do I? If he truly is Christ to us, death has lost its sting. All because we are sure where we will spend eternity. We will all live forever. But are you completely confident of where? With whom? John the Apostle was very clear: "He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son has not life" (1 John 2:15) A person may go to heaven without health, riches, honor, learning, or friends, but he can never go there without Christ.

When we commit our lives to Christ in response to his ultimate question, we are ushered into eternal life now. This makes our physical death only a transition in living forever. Spiritual death to self comes in a complete surrender of our lives to Christ. This is a primary conviction of biblical Christianity. Paul explained the wonder of this assurance in Romans 6:8-11: "Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over him. For the death that he died, he died to sin once and for all; but the life that he lives, he lives to God. Likewise, you also, reckon yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord." At the point of our physical demise, it will be said,

Grief for you would surely be wrong,

You took life on tiptoe, firm and strong.

Death came no conjurer in the end;

You simply rose to meet Christ, your Friend. And we will know him because of the profound friendship we have shared with him all through this initial phase of eternity. He will have been with us through all the trials of life, turning our struggles into stepping stones. And then at the point of physical cessation, he will embrace us and walk with us through the valley of the shadow of death and into heaven.

*There is no life, no life without its hunger.
Each restless heart beats so imperfectly,
But when You come and I am filled with wonder,
Sometimes, I think I glimpse eternity.
You raise me up so I can stand on mountains.
You raise me up to walk on stormy seas.
I am strong when I am on Your shoulders.
You raise me up to more than I can ever be.*

Christ whispers in our souls, “ Who do you say that I am?” Everything, now and for eternity, depends on your answer.

1 Graham, Brendan and Lovland, Rolf. *You Raise Me Up*. ©2002 Peermusic III, Ltd. Universal- Polygram International Publishing, Inc. C.C.L.I. Number 4434612. www.ccli.com.

2 Browning, Robert. *Men and Women*. 1855. Michigan Historical Reprint Series: Scholarly Publishing Office, University of Michigan Library (December 2005).

3 Shaw, George Bernard. *Preface to Androcles and the Lion: On the Prospects of Christianity*. 1912. IndyPublish, February 2009.

4 Lewis, C. S. *Mere Christianity*. 1952; copyright renewed 1980. HarperCollins. New York: 2001.

5 Drummond, Henry. *The Greatest Thing in the World and 21 Other Addresses by Henry Drummond*. 1930; edited by G. F. Maine and J. Y. Simpson, 1953. Great Britain: Collins 1966.

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