

# BaptistWay Bible Series for January 20: Not an easy way

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### Not an easy way

- Mark 8:27-38

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All along, Mark's Gospel has been concerned with the disclosure of Jesus' identity through the accounting of his stories and deeds. Now, Jesus himself asks some questions of his disciples about this identity business. It is a pivotal point in Mark's telling of Jesus' story. Reality's shadows in the shape of a cross lengthen over Jesus' movement.

Mark moves to a more pointed personal exchange between Jesus and his disciples. Jesus' first question is a rather mild one to the whole group. He asks, "Who do people say that I am?" (v. 27). Notice several disciples take a turn at this first question: "And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'" (v. 28).

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These were public opinions at the time about the 30-something year-old former carpenter from Nazareth. Jesus possessed the qualities of all of these prominent figures of Israel's past. These were reasonable responses to all Jesus was saying and doing. The disciples would have been well aware of the popular perceptions of Jesus to the culture at-large. As Mark tells it, it sounds like many of the disciples want to "chime in" on a question they can answer easily.

This is a safer question, because isn't it easier to answer for other people rather than for ourselves about exactly who Jesus is? We can quote rumors and reports about the latest controversial book on the sexuality of Jesus or speculate ad infinitum about the latest eschatological theory of a so-called prophecy expert telling the world that Jesus is going to literally return to planet earth but leave surviving sinners behind. We can complain eloquently about the misguided theological notions of people who believe differently than we do about biblical interpretation, women in ministry, homosexuality, denominational leadership, evangelism or social justice issues. With enough emotional distance, we can remain neutral observers in a philosophical debate rather than passionate participants in seeking to truly answer the next question with our lives as much as with our opinions: Who do you say that Jesus is?

This second question is the more difficult question to answer precisely because it is the most personal. "But who do you say that I am?" (v. 29). Like Peter, we can likely come up with some answers of our own: Lord,

Messiah, Christ, Savior or Son of God. But beyond reciting the conventional titles we've learned from Scripture or Sunday school, what does our confession about Jesus really mean?

Like the reluctant disciples, our answers to the second question may not come as quickly or easily. Notice Peter is the only one who speaks up this time: "You are the Messiah" (v. 30).

This isn't unusual for Peter. He has a habit of running his mouth before his mind is fully in gear. Yet his confession in response to the second question reveals something far deeper and more profound than all the answers given to the first. From all we know of Peter, his confession is not because he is spiritually superior to all other disciples. What he sees and names in Jesus is not because he is privy to classified information. Peter's confession that Jesus is the Messiah is because his life had been transformed by sharing a deep friendship with him. Peter understood who Jesus was after watching him work for the good of other people and listening to him proclaim the message of the kingdom of God.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells Peter he will build his church on the "Rock" of Peter's confession. However, here in Mark, Jesus quickly begins to give a fuller definition of Peter's confession about what it means to be the Messiah. Peter's trouble does not come with saying rightly who Jesus is. It comes in living rightly the meaning of his confession.

Right away Jesus explains the Son of Man must undergo great suffering and rejection, be killed and after three days rise again (v. 31). Jesus' candor about this reality leaves Peter in a state of shock. The notion of a suffering Messiah was unquestionably offensive.

Tom Long puts this into perspective: "Peter is like a man who has just been named campaign manager of a promising presidential candidate who astonishingly hears the candidate proclaim he can accomplish his goals

only by being assassinated!”

Peter asks to have a word with Jesus, but barely has Peter said a word before Jesus rebukes him saying, “Get behind me Satan!” (v. 33). Though Peter confesses Jesus is the Messiah, he finds out what Jesus means by it is something far different than what he means by it.

Jesus sure doesn’t sugar-coat anything: If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it (vv. 34-35).

Like Peter, we may be tempted to believe religious faith protects us from suffering while promising security and success. If you can just name what you want, God will help you get there: “I want a spouse, power, riches. I want success, a good marriage, exciting sex. I want fulfillment. ...” The problem is that the center of the universe is still “I.”

Jesus never minces words about how hard it’s going to be to follow the One Peter confessed as Messiah. He doesn’t give away prizes and gifts in order to attract a crowd to him. He doesn’t offer personal incentives for following him. Jesus’ agenda is not for us to merely find ourselves, but to first find God.

In the economy of God, finding life that really is life is the luxury of losing your life in the first place. Jesus wants to get through to us that such a life is not found in having things, but being somebody. He is clear that only by laying aside selfish preoccupations and self-centered motivations for personal fulfillment can a person really follow Jesus. It’s hardly a genius marketing strategy that promises people the good life.

But it is the plan for helping people discover the life well-lived. It won’t be easy or comfortable or convenient, but Jesus says it’s the only way to save our lives; to give them away for the sake of the gospel.

Who do you say Jesus is? The point-blank question posed to Peter is the same one still posed to us. If our answers are the same as his, we will live this confession not just with our lips but with our lives.

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