

Explore the Bible: Who is Jesus?

February 15, 2017

- The Explore the Bible lesson for March 5 focuses on Matthew 16:13-28.

One day when I was in high school, my big sister and I were having a conversation about drinking alcohol. Somewhere in that conversation, I made the comment that I didn't drink because my mother and father had taught me not to, although I have no memory of them ever lecturing me on the matter. They taught me by example.

That's when my sister said something I've never forgotten all these years later. When I used my parents' convictions as my own, she said, "That's good enough." She was telling the truth.

Tests will come

In time, no matter what our faith community or even our family may have taught us about Jesus since infancy, we will find ourselves having to answer for ourselves what we have personally chosen to believe. Hiding behind the faith of others will, in time, not hold us up when the real faith tests come. And, come they will.

At this point in Matthew's Gospel, we find Jesus and the disciples reaching a critical crossroads. From this point forward, Jesus turns his primary attention toward Jerusalem and the cross that awaits him there.

Jesus wants to know if the disciples have reached a point of maturity regarding their faith in him. It would also seem Jesus wanted the disciples to know for themselves.

After asking the disciples to report to him who other people believe him to be, Jesus personalizes the question for the disciples. "But who do you say

that I am?’” Jesus asked them as recorded in verse 15.

The time has come

In the life of every follower of Jesus, there comes a moment in time when they must make their faith their own. That time has now come for the disciples. An interesting point of discussion for any group of people studying this passage would be to allow others to share what it was like when that moment came in their lives. Some may realize it never has come.

We may start believing in Jesus as the Messiah as the next natural step of a child raised in a family of faith. Yet we never truly start following Jesus until we conclude within the depths of our own heart and conscience Jesus is the Messiah. The kind of faith required to give our lives to following Jesus simply cannot be borrowed; it must be possessed personally.

That’s because faith is not merely a set of beliefs about God as it is a relationship with God through Christ. Imagine a husband or wife telling their spouse on a daily basis how much they loved them but never did one thing that demonstrated that love. True faith is not what we say or claim to believe. True faith can be measured in the direction of our steps in following Jesus.

Vital verse

That may well make Matthew 16:15 one of the most important verses in all the Gospels, if not the entire Bible. Only when Peter answers that question for himself does Jesus begin to disclose more fully to Peter the ultimate nature of his presence in this world and what it will cost Peter to live out that conviction for himself.

Note in particular that Jesus, after Peter’s personal confession, says these incredibly powerful words. “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,” (v. 21).

Those are sobering words. Perhaps many of us grew up in church singing the wonderful faith song, “I Have Decided to Follow Jesus.” Yet as sincerely as we sang those words, at some point we must consider the consequences those words entail.

During the Civil War, in late May and early June of 1864, Union and Confederate forces clashed just outside Richmond, Va., at the battle of Cold Run. During those two weeks, both sides suffered more than 18,000 casualties, only to end in what amounted to a draw.

Certitude

The night before one particularly brutal assault both sides knew was coming with the morning sun, men were known to sew their names inside the lining of their coats. Assuming they would die in the next battle, they wanted to provide some way for their bodies to be identified. Yet their loyalty to their cause and their convictions would not allow them to do anything but prepare for inevitable death.

For the modern mind, it’s difficult to imagine facing certain death and being willing to walk straight into death’s jaws anyway. It may be just as difficult for any of us to imagine that it could cost our lives to follow Jesus.

That’s why Jesus isn’t as interested in our knowing what others believe about him. Jesus wants to know what each of us, individually, believes about him.

Every step we take from this moment forward, claiming to be a follower of Jesus, depends on it.

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