

“The Most Important Question in History”

Matthew 16:13-24

Series: *Follow Week 5. Decision*

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Sometimes a student will give an answer on a test which is really good but completely wrong. Here’s how one student managed to give the best wrong answer to every question:

Q-1: Where was the Declaration of Independence signed?

A: At the bottom of the page

Q-2: What is the main reason for divorce?

A: Marriage

Q-3: What can you never eat for breakfast?

A: Lunch & dinner

Q-4: How can a man go eight days without sleeping?

A: He sleeps at night.

Q-5: If it took eight men ten hours to build a wall, how long would it take four men to build it?

A: No time at all, the wall is already built.

Q-6: How can you drop a raw egg onto a concrete floor without cracking it?

A: Any way you want. Concrete floors are very hard to crack.

Q-7: What is the main reason for failure?

A: Exams

Believe it or not, Jesus’ students also give good wrong answers. In our *Follow* series, we’ve reached the midway mark of the Gospels and the turning point of Jesus’ ministry. After calling four fishermen, a tax collector and seven others to follow Him, after teaching, preaching and healing in the streets, synagogues and shoreline of Galilee, after witnessing growing multitudes who hunger for bread, healing and the Word of God, Jesus decides to take His inner circle on a retreat. He wants to ask them a critical, essential question.

They journey north twenty-five miles from the shore of Galilee. Going upstream, along the Jordan Valley, they arrive in an area that is the opposite of Jerusalem. Though it is ruled by Herod the Great’s son Philip, it is far more Gentile than Jewish. His capital city is called by two names Pania – named after the half-goat god Pan from which we get our word “panic” – and Caesarea – to honor the emperor Caesar Augustus. If you visit Caesarea Philippi today you will see large caves and gushing streams. In Jesus’ day, impressive temples stood in front of the caves. One dedicated to Caesarea Augustus, the others to the god Pan. In fact, one shrine is called the Temple of the Dancing Goats. It was a place of pagan worship, animal sacrifice and human sacrifice. Caesarea Philippi sits at the base of Mount Hermon, Israel’s highest mountain.

Why does Jesus take His team to the edge of the Holy Land? It might be He wants to get them away from the crowds. Perhaps He intends to immerse them in a foreign culture. Caesarea Philippi is filled with idols, altars, philosophies and opinions. When they reach this place, He suddenly turns and asks what they've been hearing about Him.

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Matthew 16:13

They supply several opinions from the crowds.

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." Matthew 16:14

Now those are good answers, but they are dead wrong. Why? Because all the people they mention are dead. Jesus is not some old prophet from the past who climbed up out of a tomb. Even the disciples sense Jesus came not from below but above. But who is He? They aren't sure. So Jesus forces the issue.

"But what about you?" he asked, "Who do you say I am?" Matthew 16:15

While the other students look nervously at one another, Peter steps forward and announces, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). That is the right answer. Jesus even praises Peter saying,

"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 16:17-19

Not bad! Wouldn't it be great if God whispered test answers in your ear?

Immediately after Peter's answer, Jesus "warned them not to tell anyone that he was the Christ." (Matthew 16:20). Why? Peter has the right answer...but for the wrong reason. So do many others. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Yet in his mind, Peter probably has a popular misconception of the Messiah. He pictures a warrior hero who drives out their enemies, conquers every nation, and spreads a Jewish empire from sea to shining sea. Jesus is not starting that kind of revolution. He does not need that kind of publicity. This is why He tells His disciples to keep it quiet. In fact, when Jesus describes His true mission, it shatters Peter's imperial dreams. For the first time, the Master reveals His strategy:

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Matthew 16:21

Grabbing his Master by the arm, Peter pulls Him aside and says, "Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" (Matthew 16:22) Jesus' fiery reply sears deep into Peter's soul. With the voice He uses to cast out demons, the Master turns and says to His pupil, "Get behind me, Satan!" he said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." (Matthew

16:23) Get out of my way, Satan! You are a temptation, a trap, an obstacle in my path. That's your will, not God's will. Right answer. Wrong reason.

One moment Peter is a blessing, the next, a barrier. At first the voice of God speaks through him and then the voice of Satan. Peter stands at the door of heaven with the key in his hand. In the very next instant, he finds himself in the dreadful shadow of the gates of hell. What happened? You can have all the right information about Jesus, and still be terribly wrong. Friends who graduated from seminary in my class went to another seminary where they studied under a professor who lost his faith while writing his Ph.D. dissertation on the person and work of Jesus Christ. He kept teaching at that seminary. You can be an elder, pastor, or seminary professor, give all the right answers and still be terribly wrong. You can sit in worship services year after year, teach Sunday School or attend Growth Groups and still not know the Lord. And somehow, there are multitudes of people out there who claim to believe in Jesus or in God and yet want nothing to do with His family the Church. Right answer, but all wrong.

The most important question in history is "Who do you say I am?" The way you answer this question will determine how you live in this world and how you will live in the next world. Some in Jesus' day said He was the devil. They opposed Him. Some said He was a rabbi. They ignored Him. Some called Him a prophet. They rejected Him. Some say today He was a good teacher, a religious leader, a great historical figure, a tragic revolutionary, a cynic, a fanatic, a maniac. They want to dismiss Him, avoid Him, bury Him. Trouble is: Jesus won't stay dead. He keeps showing up and asking this question: Who do you say I am?

The most important question in history asks for a Decision. Do you believe the **Truth** about Jesus? The people who knew Him first-hand ultimately came to one amazing answer: Jesus is God in the flesh. He is fully God and fully human. Greeks, Romans, Indians, Egyptians, Babylonians might believe in a godman. Not Jews. They believe in One God who lives in heaven. So how did these good, faithful Jews come to believe a fellow Jew is the Son of God? They watched Him walk on water, cast out demons, heal diseases, stop the storms, forgive sins and rise from the dead. At times they doubted. But ultimately they could not deny it. When He asks, "Who do you say I am?" they have to reply, "You are the Son of the Living God, God the Son, the Great I AM."

He still asks us: Who do you say I am? It's a question which demands a Decision. In a famous quote C.S. Lewis writes,

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic or else he would 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. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

Most important questions doesn't just ask for an answer. They also ask for action. 'Where are you going to college?' 'Will you take the job?' 'Will you marry me?' If you call Jesus your

Lord and Savior, the answer requires action. Knowing the Truth is not enough. You have to do something. This decision points you in a direction and the direction determines your destination.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”
Matthew 16:24-26

Jesus gives a three point sermon on what it means to be His disciple: 1. Deny yourself, 2. Take Up Your Cross, 3. Follow Me (by the way, in Greek all three phrases start with the same letter: A – Three points, same letter – this proves Jesus learned to preach at Princeton Seminary).

If you believe the Truth about Jesus, the next step is to **Trust** Him. You place your life in His hands. What does Jesus mean when He says, “deny yourself”? It doesn’t mean to deny yourself chocolate, ice cream or television for Lent. It doesn’t mean to be in denial, to lie to yourself. In this case, you deny only one thing: yourself. You give up yourself. You give up the right to yourself. You give your life over into God’s hands. This is the same word when Peter denies he is a follower of Jesus. So either you deny you are a follower of Jesus or you deny you are a follower of yourself. There’s no middle ground. In another quote from Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis describes Jesus as saying:

“Give me all of you!!! I don’t want so much of your time, so much of your talents and money, and so much of your work. I want YOU!!! ALL OF YOU!! No half measures will do. I don’t want to only prune a branch here and a branch there; rather I want the whole tree out! Hand it over to me, the whole outfit, all of your desires, all of your wants and wishes and dreams. Turn them ALL over to me, give yourself to me and I will make of you a new self---in my image. Give me yourself and in exchange I will give you Myself. My will, shall become your will. My heart, shall become your heart.”

How do you do that practically? Jesus says, “Take up your cross.” When someone carries a cross it means one thing: death. Now Jesus doesn’t want you to die. He wants you to put to death your way of doing things. You put to death whatever comes between you and Him, whatever gets in the way of your relationship with Him. In order to gain the Lord, you must make room for Him by losing a few things. You may have to

- Release your control on the people in your life.
- Surrender your right to feel sorry for yourself.
- Let go of the expectations you impose on everyone around you.
- Loosen your grip on some possessions.
- Stop reaching for the next rung on the career ladder.
- Put down the addiction that holds you in its clutches.
- Clear out the guilt, the shame and the resentment stashed up in your soul.
- Admit that you were wrong and ask forgiveness.
- Quit listening to the criticisms in your head that tell you God will never forgive you.

When we believe the Truth, and Trust him with our whole self, then we **Turn** and daily follow His Way. Jesus says the last step is “daily follow me” (Luke 9:23). It all comes down to this question: Do you have in mind God’s concerns or human concerns? Is it “Thy will” or “My will”? Your way or God’s way? Our culture says, “Grab for everything you can. Try to gain the whole world.” Jesus says, “What good is having the whole world if you’re not around to enjoy it? Let it go, you don’t need it.” People say, “Take charge of your life, be the master of your destiny.” Jesus says, “That’s the way to lose your life. Give your life to me. I’ll save it for you. I’ll keep it safe.”

Now I’m not against saving or preparing for the future. The problem comes when we keep gathering and collecting and keeping what God gives so we can spend it on ourselves. If you do that, you will never have enough. You will always be searching for more. And one day you’ll have to leave your stash behind. God blesses us so we can bless our families. Yet God also blesses us so we can bless others. God gives to us so we can give to others and invite others to join the kingdom.

Someone said to me once, “It must be no fun to ask people to give.” It doesn’t bother me at all. Why? First, I’m not asking you to give to me. I’m not asking you to do this for me. That would be selfish. We are doing this for the Lord. Second, I don’t mind asking people to give because I know disciples of Jesus want to give. They enjoy giving. They love to bless others. They live to bless others. If you don’t love to bless others with your financial gifts along with your time and spiritual gifts, you need to ask yourself, “What’s wrong with my relationship with Jesus?” Jesus is at heart a giver. “For God so loved the world that He gave...” (John 3:16). If you follow Jesus, you will become a joyful giver. Third, the reason I love doing this is I see the difference your generous gifts make in the life stories of people who pass through this building: homeless and hungry neighbors, people struggling in their marriage and job, those wrestling with grief, addiction, and depression, children, youth and adults hungering for God’s Word and a new life. God blesses each one of us so we can be a blessing.

You were that blessing for Denise. Caught up in the trauma of domestic violence, Denise and her daughter had to get away. But where could they go? Family Promise provided the answer. Each week they lived at a different church while the workers at the Family Promise Center helped Denise get on her feet and find a job. She was especially touched by all of you. During the four weeks they were here this summer, you rallied around them, ate meals with them, and became their family. Denise and her daughter enjoyed the band practices so much they even came to worship on Sunday. And she noticed something: that at Woodside, whenever there is a need, you rally around that person. That’s what you did for her. And now today, following your example, Denise wants to give back. You blessed her and now she wants to be a blessing to help others move from homelessness to home and hope.

Jesus is the Truth. Trust Him. Turn His Way and Follow Him. Step out. Take a risk. Go farther than you think you can afford. You’ve been blessed. Go out and bless. Just like Denise.