

It's All About Jesus

Session 3

March 17, 2024

The Identity of Jesus

Session Point: Jesus invites us to identify with Him.

Session Passage: Luke 9:18-26

Luke 9:18-19

Connection to the Point. Jesus asked His disciples how others saw Him.

Setting for Luke 9. The opening verses of Luke 9 record Jesus sending out the Twelve to preach and heal. When they returned, they reported to Jesus what they had done (v. 10). The crowds followed Jesus and His disciples to Bethsaida (near where the Jordan River flows into the Sea of Galilee in the north). Here Jesus taught and healed, then fed five thousand men (plus another ten to fifteen thousand women and children) with two fish and five pieces of bread. After everyone was filled, the disciples picked up twelve baskets of leftover food. (This is the only Galilean miracle recorded in all four Gospels.) Mark said Jesus then sent His disciples and the crowd away (Mark 6:45).

He was praying in private (v. 18). Jesus prayed often; at least twenty-five distinct times of Jesus praying are recorded in our four Gospel accounts. Jesus prayed on many different occasions with His disciples and others; several of these times Jesus prayed alone (Matt. 14:23; Mark 1:35; Luke 22:39-41). The Gospel accounts record Jesus praying especially before significant events in His life. Since Jesus (who is God) needed to pray, how much more do we (who are not God) need to pray! If we follow Jesus's model, we will pray with others, for others, on many different occasions, as well as praying alone. God, through the apostle Paul, commanded us to be in a state of prayer at all times: "pray constantly" (1 Thess. 5:17).

His disciples were with him (v. 18). Luke did not specify whether or not the disciples were close enough to hear Jesus pray. However, they certainly knew about Jesus's prayer life. This part of His life so impressed them that they asked Him to teach them how to pray (Luke 11:1). Jesus taught them to pray using "The Model Prayer" (Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4) and prayed for them "The Lord's Prayer" (John 17).

"Who do the crowds say that I am?" (v. 18). In addition to Luke, Matthew (16:13-20), Mark (8:27-30), and John (6:66-69) record this event (or similar events). Since Jesus is omniscient (knows everything except when He will return [Matt. 24:36]), He was not asking for information He didn't know (Luke 5:22; 6:8; John 6:64; 16:19). Rather, He was asking what His disciples had heard the crowds say about His identity. Likely Jesus asked them so He could use the opportunity to teach His disciples who He was and to distinguish that from what the crowds thought He should be. The crowds were looking for Messiah—but a different kind of Messiah. They were looking for (1) a political/military ruler like King David, who would overthrow the Romans, and (2) someone who would do miracles and feed them as God, under Moses's leadership, had fed their ancestors in the wilderness. (Luke placed this account immediately following the "Feeding of the 5,000.")

John the Baptist (v. 19). Most New Testament scholars believe that Jesus's mother, Mary, and John the Baptist's mother, Elizabeth, were cousins (1:36). The disciples first told Jesus that the crowds thought He might be John the Baptist raised from the dead. The New Testament refers to at least six different rulers named Herod. Herod Antipas, the ruler of Galilee, had married Herodias, the wife of his brother, Herod Phillip who ruled east of the Sea of Galilee (Mark 6:14-29). John the Baptist had proclaimed Herod's marriage to Herodias illegitimate. Herod Antipas had John imprisoned, then had John's head cut off at the request of Herodias and

her daughter, Salome. Even after John's death, Herod Antipas continued to fear John the Baptist and his judgment (Matt. 14:2). Herod thought Jesus may have been John the Baptist raised from the dead (v. 1).

Others, Elijah (v. 19). The disciples also told Jesus that others in the crowds thought He was Elijah. The Old Testament prophet Elijah spoke for God during the reign of Ahab, king of Israel (the Northern Kingdom). Elijah's name means "Yahweh is my God." He was born about 900 BC and lived for about fifty years. Much of Elijah's ministry confronted Baal worship, particularly the king and queen's participation in and encouragement of it. In Jesus's transfiguration, (immediately following these verses), Elijah represented the prophets in the Old Testament and Moses represented the law (Matt 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36).

Still others, that one of the ancient prophets has come back (v. 19). The disciples told Jesus about the crowd's third response: some thought Jesus was one of the other Old Testament prophets who had been resurrected. Although Luke did not mention it, perhaps some of the disciples also wondered about Jesus's true identity. Jesus then turned His focus to the disciples and used the opportunity to teach them about His role as God's Messiah in contrast to what the crowds thought the Messiah should be. Not everyone sees Jesus for who He really is.

Luke 9:20-22

Connection to the Point. Jesus tied His identity to His death and resurrection.

"But you," he asked them (v. 20). The disciples had told Jesus who the crowds believed Him to be (vv. 18-19). Next Jesus called for their beliefs.

"Who do you say that I am?" (v. 20). The disciples had been with Jesus for some time, had heard His teaching, and had seen His healing and casting out demons. They had been sent out by Jesus; upon returning, they reported to Jesus what they had done. Now Jesus wanted them to understand who He was and the kind of Messiah He would be, so He asked what they thought about Him.

Peter answered, "God's Messiah" (v. 20). As was his custom, Peter responded for the rest of the disciples. The disciples likely believed the contemporary Jewish expectation that God would send a political/military leader to overthrow Roman rule. The Hebrew title for this person we translate as *Messiah*, the Greek title as *Christ*. Both titles mean "Anointed One," a person on whom God's Spirit would rest in a unique way. This title recalls the Old Testament practice of anointing a leader (prophet, priest, or king) with oil representing the Holy Spirit's presence with him. Luke had already used this title spoken by (1) the angel describing Jesus's birth to the shepherds (2:11), (2) Simeon when Jesus was brought to the temple (2:26), (3) the crowd before John baptized Jesus (3:15), and (4) demons when Jesus cast them out (4:41). In both Matthew's (16:13-23) and Mark's (8:27-33) accounts, Peter used the title *Messiah*, but Matthew added the phrase "Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). John's account calls Jesus "The Holy One of God" (John 6:69). Matthew also revealed that God had given Peter this knowledge (Matt. 16:17). Peter had the right title, *Messiah*, but he did not yet have the right understanding of what that title meant. Later, at Jesus's transfiguration (Luke 9:28-36), God affirmed what Peter had confessed in verse 20.

But he strictly warned and instructed them to tell this to no one (v. 21). Today, we might congratulate Peter for giving the correct answer to Jesus's question. However, Jesus did just the opposite; He warned and instructed His disciples not to use this title. Stein explained: "The command for silence was given not because Peter's confession was false but precisely because it was true. . . . Such a proclamation would have had disastrous consequences; for to Jesus, 'Christ/Messiah' meant suffering and death as God's Anointed, whereas among the people it signified the Anointed King who would throw off the Roman yoke, smite the Gentiles, and bring political independence and greatness to Israel."¹ Jesus had already rejected the false Jewish

interpretation of who/what Messiah would be/do during His temptations (4:1-13). Jesus also rejected this title after He had cast out demons (Mark 3:11-12; Luke 4:41). If Jesus had allowed the Jews to use this title, likely conflict with Rome would have occurred immediately, and attempts to crucify Him likely begun at that time rather than at the time of God's choosing—just the right time (Rom. 5:6).

Before Jesus described to His disciples the kind of *Messiah* He was, He warned them against using this title because of the Jewish misunderstanding of what it meant. This misunderstanding in Luke's account is even more prominent in Mark's Gospel account (Peter was Mark's eyewitness source), and some scholars have named it "The Messianic Secret." On several occasions Jesus did not allow His disciples and others to use the title *Messiah/Christ*. To teach His disciples the correct understanding of Messiah, Jesus explained what this title really meant.

It is necessary that the Son of Man (v. 22). Having stopped the misleading use of the title *Messiah*, Jesus explained who God's Messiah actually would be in a fourfold description of what would happen to Him. Jesus used His favorite title for Himself, Son of Man, to describe His role as the God-man, Immanuel (Matt. 1:23). Each aspect of this description of Jesus as Messiah was important to the fulfillment of Scripture.

Suffer many things (v. 22). First, Messiah would *suffer many things*. The Gospel writers pointed to Jesus's agony in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, physical abuse at His trials, mistreatment at the hands of the Roman soldiers (scourging, crown of thorns, hitting), carrying the cross, crucifixion, words on the cross, feeling forsaken, death, and other such *things* to describe Jesus's suffering. The Jews never expected Messiah to suffer.

Be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes (v. 22). Second, Messiah would not be welcomed as God's representative by the Jewish religious leaders. Instead, these leaders rejected Jesus. This rejection led to Jesus's arrest, trials, crucifixion, and to God's response: Jesus's resurrection.

Be killed (v. 22). Third, Messiah would not be a political/military conqueror; instead, in cooperation with the Roman government, these Jewish religious leaders had Jesus crucified.

Be raised the third day (v. 22). Fourth, Messiah would be raised on the third day following His death. Jesus died about 3 p.m. on a Friday afternoon. Jews counted any part of a day as a full day. Since their day began at 6 p.m., Friday counted as one day. Saturday was the second day. From 6 p.m. Saturday until near dawn on Sunday was the third day. Therefore, according to Jewish reckoning of time, Jesus was in the tomb three days.

Luke 9:23-26

Connection to the Point. Jesus called His disciples to identify with Him by following Him.

He said to them all (v. 23). Jesus had explained to the apostles the true meaning of who the Messiah is and what He would experience (v. 22). Then Jesus enlarged His audience by teaching them and other disciples three aspects of what following Him actually meant (v. 23). Through a series of contrasts Jesus also taught the basis of this radical discipleship (vv. 24-26).

If anyone wants to follow after me (v. 23). Traveling rabbis were common in Jesus's day. Those who followed them were called *disciples* or learners. Jesus explained exactly what following Him would mean by issuing three specific commands.

Let him deny himself (v. 23). First, all those who follow Jesus must put Him first in their lives by denying their own desires. Although in English the word *let* implies permission, this construction in Greek is a command. Biblical belief is not merely mental agreement with a set of truths about Jesus because even the demons know those facts (Jas. 2:19). Biblical faith requires a commitment to Jesus as Lord—even above one's personal

desires. Biblical faith requires this same commitment today as it did when Jesus first commanded it. Biblical faith that results in following Jesus requires a commitment to deny ourselves.

Take up his cross daily (v. 23). Second, Jesus commanded each person who followed Him to take up his or her cross daily. We can't take up Jesus's cross just once because we are not the perfect once-for-all sacrifice for sin as Jesus was (Heb. 7:27; 9:12,26; 10:10). God has a purpose for each person; that purpose begins with denying our personal desires and replacing them with what God wants us to do. Unlike Matthew 16:24 and Mark 8:34, Luke reflected Jesus's expectation was *daily*, emphasizing the requirement that His disciples were to practice a lifestyle consistent with putting Jesus first. Biblical salvation is not merely a single commitment at a point in time (although it begins that way). According to God's Word in Luke 9:23, following His plan for our lives—taking up our crosses and living as God desires—involves a daily commitment. This dying to self and living for God is a command, not an option, for all who follow Jesus.

And follow me (v. 23). The third aspect of discipleship is Jesus's command for His disciples to follow Him. Rather than three distinct commands, these commands combine perfectly to describe a genuine follower of Jesus. To follow Jesus involves obeying all His commands 24/7/365. God's grace is sufficient when we fail (2 Cor. 12:9). This lifelong process is called *sanctification* (becoming holy) and is the second of the three aspects of salvation. (Conversion is first; glorification is the third and occurs at death or when we see Jesus.) Following Jesus may mean giving up not only our desires, but also our lives. Every day an average of thirteen Christians are killed for their faith.²

Setting for verses 24-26. In a series of contrasts, verses 24-26 reveal the basis, the rationale for Jesus's three-fold command for His followers (v. 23). Through each of these three contrasts, Jesus pointed out the impossibility of people achieving their goals outside of God's plan. The Holy Spirit may have inspired Luke to include these contrasts as a means of addressing objections people have to Jesus's radical discipleship demands.

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it (v. 24). The first contrast deals with people attempting to earn their own salvation apart from God's answer: the gospel of Jesus Christ (Eph 2:8-10). The word translated *life* here is also translated *soul* (Matt. 10:28; Mark 12:30) and refers to the aspect of self that distinguishes one person from another person and continues beyond death.

But whoever loses his life because of me will save it (v. 24). Every person who follows Jesus according to His definition of discipleship (v. 23) will be saved, even if they lose their physical lives.

For what does it benefit someone (v. 25). Jesus's second contrast deals with the value of a person's work and goals for life. Jesus addressed those who rejected His definition of discipleship in favor of their personal goals.

If he gains the whole world, and yet loses or forfeits himself? (v. 25). Using hyperbole (an exaggeration to make a point), Jesus explained that even if a person could gain the whole world, he or she loses what is most important: eternal life.

Whoever is ashamed of me and my words (v. 26). Jesus's third contrast deals with the obedience required of His followers. Being ashamed in this context refers to disowning Jesus. Jesus's person and message cannot be separated.

The Son of Man will be ashamed of him (v. 26). The Son of Man (Jesus Himself) will reject that person as that person has rejected Jesus and the lifestyle He demands (v. 23).

When he comes in his glory (v. 26). When God brings history to a close at the time of final judgment, Jesus will return in glory, a brilliant, shining light signifying the consummation of God's plan (John 17:1,5,24).

And that of the Father and the holy angels (v. 26). This glory Jesus revealed was also mentioned by the Old Testament prophet Daniel (Dan. 7:9-14), by Paul (2 Thess. 1:7), as well as in the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 25:31). It refers here to the complete victory of God in bringing history to ultimate fulfillment. How we respond to these verses—especially to Jesus's definition of true discipleship (v. 23)—reveals our salvation, our status as His disciples.

1. Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, "The New American Commentary," Vol. 24 (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 277.
2. "The 50 Countries Where It's Most Dangerous to Follow Jesus in 2021," *Christianity Today*, January 13, 2021, www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/january/christian-persecution-2021-countries-open-doors-watch-list.html.