

Resolving an Identity Crisis

Call to Worship: Psalm 2

1st Scripture: Matthew 16:13-27

2nd Scripture: Luke 9:18-26

Hymn #205- *Christ the Lord is Risen Today!*

Hymn #206- *Low in the Grave He Lay*

Hymn Insert- *The Easter Song*

Introduction:

Mark's recording of this event (in Mark 8:27ff), immediately follows the story of a blind man, whom Jesus healed in Bethsaida. Some of you may recall, that particular healing, because it was unusual, in that, the man was progressively healed, in two stages. In other words, it was not an *immediate* healing. Jesus had taken the blind man by the hand, and He led him out of the town, so as to deal with him privately. And then, He spit on his eyes, and put His hands on him, and asked him if he was able to see anything. And the blind man's response was, "I see men like trees, walking." In other words, the man had begun to see things, but his vision was still not perfectly clear. And so, Jesus put His hands on the man's eyes again, made him look up, and suddenly the man's vision was wholly restored. He could now see everything clearly.

Well, in a very real sense, you can say that this physical process of progressive healing, is reflective/representative of the way in which God deals with His children *spiritually*. As we grow in Christ, we are able to see and understand the will of God, more and more clearly. Indeed, the Gospel itself, manifests more and more of its depths of beauty and glory, as we continue on, in our walk with Christ.

Well, our main text brings us to one of those watershed moments, where our Lord is seeking to open the eyes of His disciples, further into understanding His role and ministry as the Messiah. For, up to this point, they were yet ignorant, regarding some very important things that had to take place, concerning Jesus, and them. And now that our Lord was preparing to head to Jerusalem for the last time, He knew that it was time to prepare them for all that was about to take place, lest they be caught off guard and utterly shattered when it happens. Their Lord; the One, upon whom they had set their hearts and lives; the One for whom, they had left everything else behind, was about to be brutally beaten, crucified and killed, and they did not expect this, at all. Their marred assumption, was that Jesus would eventually overthrow the Roman powers, which presently reigned over Israel, thereby, restoring the kingdom to Israel, under the reign of the Messiah. And so, there was a gross misunderstanding concerning the ultimate role of the

Messiah, and that needed to be corrected, before they got to Jerusalem. There was an identity crisis, surrounding the Person and role of the Christ, and the Lord Jesus needed to resolve that, in advance, so that, that which was about to happen, would not completely blind side them. And furthermore, after it all happened, He would be glorified, in having proclaimed and predicted it, beforehand, and their faith would be strengthened at His resurrection. This was indeed, an investment, which would especially bear fruit in the ministry of the Apostles, following the Lord's resurrection, and His ascension to the right hand of the Father. Here, our Lord would prepare them, for *not only* what would happen, but for what *had to happen!*

I. The Messiah's Identity and Role

Luke's account, begins with our Lord praying, on His own, before addressing His disciples, concerning this very important and critical matter. Again, this is a watershed moment, as our Lord will seek to prepare His disciples for that which is soon to happen, in Jerusalem.

Way up north, about as far north as Tyre, but inland, tracing a line from the Jordan River, up, beyond the Sea of Galilee (about 25 miles north of the northern tip), our Lord stood with His disciples, in the midst of the idol laden city of Caesarea Philippi. Within view, there would have been all manner of temples and idols, dedicated to Greek and pagan gods. And it is here, in this setting; in a setting of worldwide idolatry, that our Lord asks His disciples that most essential question of all time; that most pertinent question for all people, of all generations and times, "Who am I?" "How am I identified by the crowds, and most importantly, by you?"

And so, answering the first portion of the question, they respond, "Some say that You are John the Baptist, and others say Elijah, and still others say, that You are one of the prophets of old, who has come back from the dead." And so, in response to the shortfall of answers, proclaimed by the great majority, the Lord then turns the arrow to them, "But who do you say that I am?" "Clearly, there is an identity crisis here, as there are all manner of opinions concerning who I am...even among the crowds, who seek to follow Me. But, what about you? What do you say?" And of course, we can recall those famous words of Peter, granted him by the Holy Spirit of God, who alone could truly convince a man of this truth, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" "You are the Messiah, the long awaited Messiah of Israel, promised from the very beginning, from the time our first parents fell, in the Garden. You are the One, whom God has determined to send from the beginning; the One who would make all things right,

which have gone wrong! And furthermore, unlike these dumb, dead and useless idols, and unlike the worthless gods, represented by all of these temples, You are the Son *of the Living God!*"

And then, after commending Peter for this God motivated confession; after affirming, validating and acknowledging Peter's great confession, our Lord moves in, to address their misunderstanding about His role, as the Messiah. Presently, they see something of the truth; they are not completely blind; they "see men like trees, walking," but our Lord is going to pull back the curtain, a bit further now, to bring out, that which is presently unclear, even to His disciples.

First, we are told in verse 21 that He, "strictly warned and commanded them to tell this to no one." Now, why in the world would He do this? Why would the Lord command His disciples to hide the truth, which Peter has just confessed? Wouldn't He want everyone to know who He was? Well, Yes!...but, not yet. Why not? Verse 22 gives us the answer, and it gets to the very heart of the matter, concerning the present ignorance of even the disciples, concerning the identity and role of the Messiah. He *strictly* warned them to tell no one, "saying, The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day."

Here it is! Our Lord addresses the very heart of the matter, right here! "The Son of Man..." Indeed, He is the Son of God, but as the Messiah, He became the Son of Man for a reason! He took on flesh for an ultimate purpose, beyond reigning over a physical, and yet defiled kingdom. He came to reign over a *redeemed* kingdom, which would find this redemption, in His own death and resurrection! And so, as the Christ; as the Messiah, He *must* now prepare to suffer many things. He *must* now prepare to be rejected by the leaders of Israel. He *must* be killed. And, He *must* be raised three days later! No, He is not one of the risen prophets of old, but He Himself, must experience a resurrection, unto the justification of His naturally fallen and condemned people! This was the furthest thing from the mind of His disciples, and so, He needed to prepare them for all that was about to happen; He needed to correct their own understanding of the identity and role of the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, who also came as the Son of Man, to suffer and die for His own! And following this, He will remind them of this reality, on at least, a few other occasions. But He opens up the curtain here, for the first time!

In the parallel texts, Peter, incapable of grasping the importance of these things, which *must* happen, begins to rebuke our Lord. But our Lord, in turn, rebukes him, as Peter could not see beyond the scope of this present world. Even the one, who had just so wonderfully made that beautiful confession about the Lord, had temporarily fallen under the influence of satan, who sought to hinder our Lord, from fulfilling this most essential part of His mission.

And so, the identity of the Messiah was to be kept on the "down low" for a time, until He would accomplish salvation, by means of His suffering and death. For now, the multitudes would not even begin to be able to handle the news of a Messiah, who must suffer and die, and be raised up again, three days later.

But the identity crisis does not end there. Our Lord then moves on to say something sobering and profound, concerning *not* only the role of the Messiah, but also, the role of those who would be His disciples and followers. Contrary to the notion that everything would now be easy, since Jesus has arrived; contrary to any inkling of a notion that this could now be "the best life now" for any of His true followers, in summary, He says the following in verse 23, "If anyone desires to come after Me" (If anyone desires to be My disciple, and to share in all of the eternal benefits, which I have come to bring), then, not only must he be able to embrace *My* true identity and role, but furthermore, He too, "must deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me." "If you want to be a Christian; if you desire to be a true disciple of Christ, then you too must set the soles of your feet, in the soil, which leads to Golgotha!"

Verse 24, "*For* whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it." If you want salvation, turn your back to this world and this life, and embrace with both arms, the life offered in Jesus Christ! If you desire forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God and eternal life, repent of your sins; repent of your present pursuit of this world's goods, and give yourself wholly to Christ. Embrace a new worldview, new ideals, new dreams, new goals and new desires...all centered upon Christ, *and you will save your life!* And you will find true meaning and purpose and joy in Him! Let go of this, and grab hold of Christ! Waste this life, from the standpoint of the world, and invest it, in serving Christ and His church!

"Well, that seems like a bit much to ask, doesn't it? Lord, you are telling us to give up all of this; to subject the whole of our lives to Your Lordship and governance; to turn our backs to the world's ideals; to pursue a *narrow way*; to awaken from the dreams of this world and to live in light of an eternal, but yet, presently invisible kingdom...isn't that a bit much to ask?" Verse

25, "For what profit is it to a man if he gains *the whole world*, and is himself destroyed or lost?" "What gain is there in obtaining the entire world, if it is at the expense of your very soul? What would you give in exchange for your soul...for the true and real you, in you?" Is it not far more worth, "giving up what you cannot keep, to gain what you cannot lose?"

"For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory, and in His Father's, and of the holy angels" (vs. 26). There will be a day, when this once crucified, dead and resurrected Christ, who sacrificed His own life for His people, will return, and nothing will be seen, but the blinding glory of His divine nature; everything material and temporal will be gone (burned up with fire---nothing of temporal value will last), and He will bring judgment upon this world! And there will be nothing material to hold onto! Friends will not be able to help. Money will be unable to help. Political power and popularity will be incapable of helping. And *all*, who are ashamed of this Christ and His words (in this life), will be rejected and condemned by Him, in the presence of the holy angels, on that day!

This is a very brief and quick survey of this text. What in the world then, does this all have to do with Easter? Why preach this particular text, as a sermon accompaniment to this holiday? Well, here is where we bring this all together.

Conclusion

1) Brethren, our Lord's revealing words to His disciples (and us), concerning the nature and role of His Messianic office, and how we are to identify with His sacrifice and sufferings in our own lives, is sobering and convicting, to say the least. Who can naturally give up this life, only to embrace painful, uncomfortable sacrifice; who can set the cross at the forefront of their lives, as the model for their own living, in a world that is totally bent on serving and gratifying self-interests and material gain? It is completely contrary to pursuing the so-called, "American Dream." But the great hope and motivation of this text, is found both, in the wonderful privilege of serving God, in accordance with His design for us (there is something so wonderful about functioning according to God's will and design, which far supersedes any and all of the temporal, unfulfilling desires of this life), and it is found in the reality of the coming resurrection, unto a new, perfect and glorious life, in heaven!

Indeed, our Lord's words are both startling and demanding. As the Messiah, unlike the marred expectations which the Jews (and even His own disciples) had concerning Him, He had to suffer many things. He had to be rejected by the religious leaders of His own natural kin. And He had to die. But, it didn't end there, did it?! If it did, we might all sink down into a pit of hopelessness. Indeed, all of those things *had to happen*, but equally important, and equally necessary, and equally certain, was the fact that He must rise from the dead three days later! You see, the end of the story completes the whole picture, doesn't it? The rivers of suffering and rejection and death, must lead into the ocean of a final resurrection! And this resurrection assumes two very relevant and critical things. First, that death would not have a final and complete victory over Him. Weeping over His lifeless body, would only be for a short time. And second, it assumes that His death serves a significant, necessary and essential purpose. The temporal reality of His death, presumes a purpose, which when accomplished, leads to His glorious resurrection. And we know, brethren, that the purpose, herein assumed, is the salvation of His lost, naturally corrupt, and condemned people. Bearing the sins of His people, He suffers their death, He conquers their sin, so that both He, and His people, will live by His resurrection!

Indeed, His resurrection assumes our own, doesn't it, brethren! It assumes that though we likewise suffer, face rejection and die, we also will be raised again, in Him. And the evidence is the new birth, which is already experienced by His people, in this life! We already experience the resurrection of the spirit; we receive the down payment of the Holy Spirit, in this life, assuming the body will follow, at the final resurrection. And Jesus's resurrection is the firstfruits unto this end; unto the full harvest of all of His people! And so, we taste the power of His resurrection, in our present spiritual resurrection, by faith, and we anticipate a final, physical, bodily resurrection, in the light of His own, physical, bodily resurrection, which took place some 2000 years ago. And that is the glory and hope of this text, brethren! This is what His disciples needed to consider, as He was heading to Jerusalem, to suffer and die for His people. And this was the very hope, which lifted and emboldened them, following the resurrection of Christ, such that they turned the world upside down, by their faithful testimony!

2) And then, lastly, for those of you who are outside of Jesus Christ. For those of you, who are not true Christians; not true followers of Jesus Christ. For those of you, who have not repented (turned away from) your sins, putting your total faith, confidence and hope, in Christ, and in Christ alone, there is something for you to consider here, as well.

Friends, do you see the reality of what the Lord is saying here? This short, brief life, is not it! There is a resurrection, beyond the grave; a resurrection unto eternal life or eternal damnation! What you do now, really counts! In fact, you are making an investment to that end, every moment that you take a breath, be it apart from Christ or in Christ! You are sowing a harvest in this life, a harvest of fruit unto everlasting life, or a harvest of weeds unto everlasting destruction! Don't waste this life on useless, temporal, unfulfilling, worthless, things! Seek God, through Jesus Christ, now, before it is too late! Have dealings with God; be washed from all of your sins, now, in Christ!

Is the sacrifice of this short life, unto the glory of your God and Creator, truly worth it? Absolutely! For, what will it profit you, if you gain the whole world (even in this short life time), and yet, forfeit the welfare of your own soul, in the process? For what would you trade your never-dying soul? Life and death are held out before you, this morning! What will you choose? There is hope in the presently reigning, resurrected, and once crucified Christ, but you must seek Him now, before it is too late! For, your only hope, will become your Judge, the moment you enter the grave! Flee to Christ by faith, right now...as I speak! Plead with Him to save you from your sins! Turn your life over to Him; follow Him, embrace eternity in Him, and leave this aging, deteriorating, dying life behind! There is victory over your sin! There is victory over death! There is reconciliation to God...but only, through and in, the resurrected, Lord Jesus Christ!

AMEN!!!