

Who Do You Say That I Am?

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Context

Jesus’ running debate with the Pharisees and the scribes from Jerusalem continues unabated. The narrative in Mark 7 was placed between the bookends of the two stories of a miraculous feeding of the crowds (6:34-44 and 8:1-10). Last week’s conflict with the Pharisees and Jerusalem scribes was preceded by the story of Jesus walk on the water and the healing of the crowds. What follows the conflict encounter is the healing of the Canaanite child, the cure of the deaf-mute (23rd Sunday gospel), and the second feeding of the crowds.

This second feeding results in another request from the Pharisees for a sign. Clearly, this group of religious leaders is unable to break out of the mode that the Messiah’s arrival is a future event. With the evidence of miracles before them they continue to ask “what can you do next – show us a sign” Jesus’ response is unequivocal: “Why does this generation seek a sign? Amen, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.” (Mk 8:12)

Jesus seems to have concluded that there is simply a persisting blindness among the Pharisees that reflects a hardened heart for which no sign will be convincing. This is why Jesus warns his disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees – that interior disposition that leads them away from the Kingdom of God already present among them (Mark 8:14-21). At the same time, Jesus hints that the disciples too may suffer from a degree of blindness – as they do not seem to grasp the fullness of the meaning of the miraculous feedings.

But even as Jesus warns them he continues his ministry of healing – in this instance, healing blindness. But note that the healing seems to occur in stages: blindness gives way to a less opaque seeing and eventually to clarity of sight. So too, if the apostles will remain with and in Jesus, they too will gradually come to fully “see” and understand the larger mission of the Holy One of God. (Mark 8:22-26) Mark’s gospel is the only one that records this particular miracle. This miracle story suggests three groups of people: (1) the uncured blind, (2) those who have received a touch from Jesus and see partially, and (3) those who have received the second touch and can see clearly.

All this leads to Caesarea Philippi and one of the pivotal moments in the gospel of Mark. The description of the coming periscope is oddly stated in the Greek, “*into the villages of Caesarea Philippi.*” Previously Mark had described it as a region (5:1, 17; 7:24, 31; 8:10). In any case, the region was twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee. The area was built up by Herod Philip to serve as the capital of his tetrarchy. It is perhaps noteworthy that the region is two days’ journey away. It’s northern location likely served to separate Jesus and his disciples from the crowds that attended his every move earlier in the ministry.

As Lane [289] notes: “The capital was located at the source of the Jordan River on the slopes of Mount Hermon in a region famed for its beauty and fertility. When the area was first given to Herod the Great by Augustus he built a temple in honor of the emperor near a grotto consecrated to the Greek god Pan. In 3 B.C. Philip rebuilt the neighboring village of Paneas as his residence and named the new city in honor of Caesar. The area was thus dominated by strong Roman associations, and it may be theologically significant that Jesus’ dignity was first recognized in a region devoted to the affirmation that Caesar is lord.”

According to *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, this city was known in antiquity as a shrine of the Greek and Roman nature god, Pan. It notes that sites of worship were likely outside in nature taking over places that had been dedicated to various Semitic deities and was possibly the location of Baal-gad or Baal-hermon of the OT (Josh 11:17 ff; Judg. 3:3; 1 Chr. 5:23). So it is perhaps intriguing that the questioning about and of Jesus takes place not in the synagogue (or a church), but out in the world, precisely in a place dedicated to a pagan god, with a name honoring the human Caesar (who was often presented as divine). As Stoffregen points out: “Where does our real confession take place? Certainly our confessions and statements about our faith in church are real -- but, I think that it goes to a different level when we proclaim our faith in Jesus in the midst of [the world].”

That is the immediate context, but the scholar Pheme Perkins [621] draws out attention to a larger context:

“The first half of the Gospel has hinted at the coming death of Jesus (1:14; 3:6; 6:14–29), although the christological emphases in that section of the narrative fell on the power and authority of Jesus. However, discordant elements were introduced in the hostility of the Pharisees and scribes, the misunderstanding of the disciples, and the limits on Jesus’ healing power in the face of unbelief (6:6). In the first section of the narrative, Jesus apparently does not wish to be known as a miracle worker, but his commands to remain silent were regularly disobeyed (1:44–45; 5:19–20; 7:36–37). The portrayal of the disciples, however, raises questions about the suitability of a faith based on witnessing miracles. Although Peter and the others appear to have reached the correct insight that Jesus is Messiah, that confession will be misunderstood if suffering is not the central truth about Jesus’ identity. The second half of the Gospel, therefore, completes the initial confession that Jesus is Messiah and Son of God (1:1; 8:29; 9:7) with the threefold repetition of the passion predictions (8:31–32a; 9:30–31; 10:32–34)... Since the disciples participate in the ministry of Jesus, they must also learn to share the suffering of the Son of Man. Each of the passion predictions is followed by an expression of disbelief, misunderstanding, or fear and then instruction on the necessity of suffering (8:34–38; 9:33–37; 10:35–45).”

Commentary: Who do you say that I am?

²⁷ Now Jesus and his disciples set out for the villages of Caesarea Philippi. Along the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸ They said in reply, “John the Baptist, others Elijah, still others one of the prophets.” ²⁹ And he asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter said to him in reply, “You are the Messiah.”

Earlier in the gospel (6:14-16), we hear a prelude to the question of Jesus’ identity as Herod speculates that he is John the Baptist come back from the grave. Now Jesus asks the disciples what is the “buzz” among the people; what are they saying about Jesus’ identity. Herod’s guess continues to float, to which is added other prophets – one might well conclude at least the word of the street acknowledges Jesus as sent from God. Jesus then puts the same question to the disciples. Peter replies, “the Messiah” (v. 29). This confession is the first correct human statement about Jesus’ identity in the Gospel. Human witness now replaces the shouted confessions of demons that Jesus had to silence.

But what was the content of the confession? It is easy for 20th century believers to think, “Well, there it is. Peter and the apostles finally get it!” But we must remember that we just passed by a miracle of Jesus healing a blind person – and it did not happen all at once. The people have already noted that Jesus is anointed in the role of prophet – and recall the *messiah* literally means “the anointed one.” In the OT anointing represents God’s affirmation that the prophet, priest, or king is the divinely chosen leader of the people. Cyrus, the king of Persia, who returns captive Israel from Babylon to Jerusalem is called “Messiah.” Even if we assume Peter and the apostles hold that Jesus will play a unique role in salvation history, what follows makes it clear that they do not understand the fullness of the confession – and so are partially blind even in their moment of witness and confession.

Rebuke as Reward

³⁰Then he warned them not to tell anyone about him. ³¹He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days. ³²He spoke this openly...

The Greek *epitimaō* (warn) is a strong word; hardly one of praise and affirmation. PHEME PERKINS [623] has a great insight on what is unfolding: “Readers might expect a word of praise for the confession, since it demonstrates that the disciples are superior to the crowds in their understanding of who Jesus is. Instead, the command to tell no one is introduced with the verb for “rebuke” (ἐπιτιμάω *epitimaō*), the same verb Mark uses to describe Jesus’ response when the demons acknowledge him as Son of God (3:12). Thus the rebuke does not impugn the correctness of the title being used. The problem with the confession is the inappropriateness of the time (prior to the passion), the context (exorcism and healing miracles), or the witnesses (spoken by demons). Since the episodes surrounding the two affirmations of Jesus’ identity in this section demonstrate that the disciples do not understand that suffering lies at the heart of Jesus’ mission, they are no more able to use the titles “Messiah” and “Son of God” correctly than the demons are. Jesus will accept both titles publicly during his interrogation by the Sanhedrin (Mark 14:62).”

As Perkins notes; it is not that Peter got it wrong, but given that he does not understand and will strongly resist the idea of a suffering Messiah, to that extent he does not understand the unique role Jesus will play in salvation history.

But ever the teacher, Jesus continues in that role to describe what it is that the Messiah must do. Verse 31 marks a new beginning. Prior to this the emphasis has been on Jesus’ authority and power as he cast out demons, healed diseases, commanded the waves, and more. Now the stress will be on his own suffering and death – and the disciples’ responsibility to follow. The lesson is brief and to the point: *He began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and rise after three days.* In its own way, this one verse plays out the remainder of Mark’s gospel. There are four things needed for Jesus to be obedient to his Father’s desire that humanity be redeemed: Jesus must:

1. suffer many things,
2. be rejected by the religious leaders,
3. be killed, and
4. after three days rise from the dead.

The beginning of v.32 (sometimes noted as v.32a) is found only in Mark: “*He spoke this openly.*” Other modern translations have “plainly.” As Mark Twain famously noted: “Many people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand.” Peter understands. He doesn’t like them. Peter would like a Messiah who wouldn’t do a stupid thing like

rising from the dead, but a smart thing like never dying (Robert Capon). In what might amount for a tit-for-tat, Peter rebukes Jesus.

Rebuke as Warning

³² *He spoke this openly. Then Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.* ³³ *At this he turned around and, looking at his disciples, rebuked Peter and said, "Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not as God does, but as human beings do."*

Jesus' words about the suffering Son of Man sparks a new exchange between Jesus and Peter. As does the previous exchange (vv. 27–30), this episode concludes with a second rebuke (v. 33).

Perkins suggests that the second rebuke (v.33) explains the first (v.30) – don't tell anyone because you still do not understand and continue to think only in human categories. To our modern ear, the moniker "Satan" would seem to equate Pete and the devil himself, but I think that is perhaps too harsh an understanding. One should recall the OT role of *satan* was as tempter. And just as *satan* tempted Jesus away from his divine mission in the desert encounter, so too, Peter is tempted Jesus to turn away from the way of the cross. But there is no command to "be gone" only the command to fall in line, in the place of a disciple, behind, following the Master.

The command to "get behind" may also indicate status. Jesus has to come first. Jesus is the leader. Peter when he rebuked Jesus, was putting himself first; so Jesus tells him, "Get behind me!" As Stoffregen notes, when someone suggests that God is their co-pilot, perhaps that is an indication for a need to change places.

Discipleship

³⁴ *He summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me."* ³⁵ *For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.*

As Jesus often does, the private conversation gives way to summoning the crowd and the offer of a larger, summary teaching. Earlier (v.33) when Jesus accuses Peter of "thinking" (*phreneo*) there is an indication of not simply cognitive thought, but something arising from an inner disposition or attitude – something pointing to the role of the human will. This become more clear in the phrase (v.34), "Whoever wishes" – pointing to the idea of human will and freedom of carrying out that will. What is the role of the will in the practical implications of discipleship: deny oneself, take up your own cross, and follow Jesus.

Stoffregen nicely asks: "What does it mean to deny oneself -- to say 'No' to oneself? Some of us may be able to deny ourselves certain foods for a time -- so that we might look and feel better; but we aren't really denying ourselves. We are still dieting for the good of self. Can we deny our thoughts of getting good things for ourselves? or of evil for our "enemies? Can we stop our lusting after people and things? or feelings of revenge towards those who have wronged us? ... Denying one's self is concerned with the will -- that one's own will should not be the controlling factor in one's life."

As many theologians and spiritual advisors have noted, these things Stoffregen lists, come to our minds whether we summons them or not. Such is the condition of the world in which we live – we are awash in the seas of temptation. But temptation is not action. If there is a desire for revenge because of a perceived wrong, there is a choice to be made and a role for the will to play. The French theologian, Maurice Blondell, opined that in the moments we most want revenge, but choose to turn the other cheek, it is in that moment we are the most Christian because we have denied our self and chosen God's will. There is a cross that is borne as we follow Christ.

NOTES

Mark 8:27 on the way. Being “on the way” (*en tei hodoi*) is a theme throughout Mark, especially in this section. *Hodos* can simply refer to a road or path, or it can refer to a way of life. Jesus is “on the way” (8:27) when he asks his question. The phrase appears again in 9:33-34. There the disciples indicate that they don't understand the way of Jesus. Jesus is on his way again in 10:17 when the rich man asks his question; and again when he gives the third passion prediction (10:32). Perhaps most significant about *hodos* is the fact that Blind Bartimaeus is on the “side of the way” in 10:46, but after the miracle, he is able to follow Jesus “on the way.” “The Way” became a title of early Christians (Acts 18:25, 26; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).

Mark 8:31 Son of Man: an enigmatic title. It is used in Dn 7:13–14 has a symbol of “the saints of the Most High,” the faithful Israelites who receive the everlasting kingdom from the Ancient One (God). They are represented by a human figure that contrasts with the various beasts who represent the previous kingdoms of the earth. In the Jewish apocryphal books of 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra the “Son of Man” is not, as in Daniel, a group, but a unique figure of extraordinary spiritual endowments, who will be revealed as the one through whom the everlasting kingdom decreed by God will be established. It is possible though doubtful that this individualization of the Son of Man figure had been made in Jesus’ time, and therefore his use of the title in that sense is questionable. Of itself, this expression means simply a human being, or, indefinitely, someone, and there are evidences of this use in pre-Christian times. Its use in the New Testament is probably due to Jesus’ speaking of himself in that way, “a human being,” and the later church’s taking this in the sense of the Jewish apocrypha and applying it to him with that meaning. *rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes:* the supreme council called the Sanhedrin was made up of seventy-one members of these three groups and presided over by the high priest. It exercised authority over the Jews in religious matters.

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