

“Who is Jesus?” (Matthew 16:13-16)

My dad has always enjoyed following baseball. As a result, I grew up watching baseball, playing baseball, and collecting baseball cards. In my 30 years as a fan I’ve watched many great players. Yet, if I were to rattle off some of my childhood favorites most of you would not recognize their names. Most of these players are long forgotten. They are yesterday’s news. Bigger, stronger, quicker, and younger athletes have replaced them. This is a reality of the game.

When it comes to every form of sports and entertainment we see a revolving door of celebrities. It is out with the old and in with the new. However, there is an exception to this rule. His name is Jesus Christ. Jesus has defied human history for 2,000 years. He is the most talked about Person in this world. There has been more written about Jesus than anyone else in the world. There have been more songs sung about Jesus than anyone else in the world. There have been more movies made about Jesus than anyone else in the world. We are left with the conclusion that man’s fame is fleeting, Christ’s fame is forever.

We are going to answer the most important question in human history, “Who is Jesus?” The most critical issue of the Christian faith is the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity stands or falls on who Jesus Christ is. What He said, did, and taught are important but they are not foundational. Jesus’ identity is. He is more than just the founder of Christianity; He is Christianity. If you substitute anyone else for Jesus—Christianity will collapse.¹

In Matthew 16, we find one of the most important passages in the entire Bible. This is the turning point in Jesus’ earthly ministry. It is also the apex of His teaching ministry. Knowing the future, Jesus realized that His own death at Jerusalem was quickly approaching. He had, therefore, to enlist some representatives whom He could leave behind to carry on His work.

1. Who does the world say Jesus is? (16:13-14). Verse 13 begins a new section where Jesus withdraws **“into the district of Caesarea Philippi”** for a time of secluded rest. Why did Jesus go into this region? He needed to get away with His disciples and talk with them about some confidential matters. At this time, **“He was asking His disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man² is?’”** Jesus takes a Gallup poll. He solicits popular opinions on who He is. Was Jesus unaware of what people were saying about Him? Of course not! Rather, He wanted the disciples to think through His identity (cf. Mark 9:33).

Both Mark and Luke record this episode. Yet, neither account includes the title **“Son of Man.”**³ Some have understood the title “Son of Man” as a reference to Jesus’ humanity and “Son of God” as speaking of His deity. This seems reasonable but it just isn’t so. The term “Son of Man” carries with it both the presence of the Jewish Messiah and divine authority (see Matt 12:3-8). Throughout Matthew’s gospel, Jesus has been revealed as the Son of Man (cf. Dan 7:13-14), who is God Himself. Even in the way Jesus posed this question, He is hinting at His identity.

“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” In 16:14, the disciples answer, **“Some say John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.”** The disciples give four different opinions. Opinion on Jesus’ identity was divided. Some thought He was John the Baptist, risen from the dead (Herod Antipas’s view, Matt 14:2). Those who thought He was Elijah saw Him as forerunner to a messiah still to come.⁴ Some concluded that Jesus was the resurrected Jeremiah,⁵ probably because of similarities between the men and their ministries. For example, both men had some strong words for Israel and both combined authority and suffering in their ministries. Perhaps the people witnessed the conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel and remembered Jeremiah’s similar ministry. Possibly they had heard rumors of a plot to get rid of Jesus even as there had been against Jeremiah.⁶ Still other Jews thought Jesus was some other resurrected prophet.⁷

Why was there such widespread confusion regarding Jesus' identity? While most people in Jesus' day agreed that a messiah was coming, they were looking for a political leader who would free the Jewish people from the tyranny of Roman rule. They anticipated that the Messiah would establish His kingdom in Jerusalem and from there extend God's reign of justice and peace to all the nations of the world.

Jesus simply didn't meet their expectations. This man was the child of a peasant woman, born in a lowly stable. He was raised in an obscure village and trained as a carpenter. At thirty years of age He became an itinerant preacher. His followers were a motley crew: fishermen, tax collectors, prostitutes, and street people. Jesus didn't pander to the religious elite. On the contrary, He condemned many as hypocrites. He didn't seem concerned about ostracizing religious and politically important people. He claimed that the kingdom He came to establish was a spiritual one.

Jesus never went to college; He never held an office; He never wrote a book; He never put His foot inside a big city or government center; He never traveled two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did any of the things that usually accompany greatness. He simply didn't fit the image of what people expected the "King of the Jews" would be.

Verse 14 tells us what people believed almost 2,000 years ago, but what do people believe today? Mormons teach that Jesus is a man who achieved great things. They believe that He was a preexistent spirit but they believe that about everyone. They say that Jesus' distinctiveness is not that He was God, but that He was God's firstborn spirit-child. Jehovah Witnesses teach that Jesus is a created being who was given the status of second-in-command. They believe that Jesus is a god, but not the Almighty God, who is Jehovah. Instead, they say that Jesus is a created individual who is the second greatest person of the universe. The Way International teaches that Jesus' existence began at His conception. They believe that Jesus Christ's existence began when He was conceived by God's creating the soul-life of Jesus in Mary. Muslims teach that Jesus is a prophet and messenger of God. According to the tenets of Islam, Jesus was only a messenger of Allah. They also say He was a sinless prophet who never achieved the greatness of the prophet Muhammed. Unitarians teach that Jesus is a great moral teacher. The Unitarian church believes that Christ was sent to earth as a great moral teacher rather than as a mediator.

There has always been a great deal of discussion regarding Jesus' identity. It is also clear that people have always held varied opinions of Him.⁸ All the ascriptions of 16:14 and the contemporary examples express great respect for Jesus, yet none is an adequate response to what His ministry sets forth about His person and His work. To the average person, Jesus was considered one among many. Good, but not *the* Best; great, but not *the* Greatest; A prophet, but not *the* Prophet. However, these views will never do. It condemns Him with faint praise. If He were only another man He was a fraud because He claimed to be equal with God the Father.⁹

One of the most basic laws of logic is the law of non-contradiction. This law states that if two statements about one particular issue contradict each other, then (1) only one of them is true, or (2) they are both false. They cannot both be true in the same sense and at the same time. If someone says, "All dogs shed hair," and another person says, "Poodles don't shed hair," then either both are wrong or one is right. They both can't be right.¹⁰ Since the major religions contradict one another, we can apply the law of non-contradiction. Either one of them is right, and the rest are wrong, or they all are wrong; they cannot all be right.

What do you say? Who is Jesus? What do you believe about His person and His work? Today, there is a great interest in Jesus. Each and every one of us should be motivated to find out more about Him. For those that have a relationship with Jesus, we must capitalize on the spiritual interest surrounding Him. While people may not be so interested in church, they are certainly curious about Jesus. As a result, we must do all that we can to spread Christ's fame far and wide.

2. Who does the Bible say Jesus is? (16:15-16). After listening to the popular opinions, Jesus asked His disciples, **“But who do you say that I am?”** (16:15).¹¹ This is one of five occasions where Jesus used a question to elicit a response of faith (cf. Matt 9:28; John 9:35; 11:25-26; 14:10).¹² In this verse, Jesus is getting very personal. If you were to look at a Greek interlinear, you would see that the word **“you”** (*humeis*) is the first word in this question. The Greek language will often move words around for emphasis.¹³ The “you” is not only emphatic; it is also plural. Jesus is asking this question of all His disciples.

In 16:16, Simon Peter¹⁴ answered, **“You are the Christ,¹⁵ the Son of the living God.”**¹⁶ Peter denotes two aspects of Jesus’ identity. First, **“You are the Christ.”** Second, **“You are the Son of the living God.”** Each title was critical to His person and His work. I’m glad Peter never went to seminary. If he had, he might have answered Jesus by saying, “Why Jesus, you are the eschatological manifestation of the *imago dei*.” Then Jesus would have said, “I’m what? What did you just call Me?”¹⁷ Peter said, “You are the Christ.” The central theme of the Old Testament Holy Books is the coming of the Messiah to establish the kingdom of God among people. The Hebrew word “messiah” (*meshiah*) means “anointed one.” In ancient times, kings, prophets, and high priests were anointed with holy oil to mark their appointment to office. The prophets used the proper name “Messiah” to refer to the One who would be anointed and sent by God—the Prophet-Priest-King whose birth the Holy Books foretold. [The Greek translation of the word “messiah” is *Christos*—which is one of the names of Jesus: Jesus Christ.]

Peter went on to say that Jesus was the **“Son of the living God.”** Jesus was unique among men. In Matthew 1:23, Jesus is given the title “Immanuel...God with us.” Prior to this, the virgin birth was emphasized because it validates Jesus as God. Talk show host Larry King, was asked, “If you could select any one person across all of history to interview, who would it be?” Mr. King’s answer was that he would like to interview Jesus Christ. When the questioner followed with, “And what would you like to ask Him?” King replied, “I would like to ask Him if He was indeed virgin-born. The answer to that question would define history for me.”¹⁸

It should be noted that there had been other confessions of faith prior to this one. In John 1:49, Nathaniel had confessed Christ as the Son of God and the disciples had declared Him God’s Son, after He stilled the storm (Matt 14:33). Peter had given a confession of faith when the crowds left Jesus after His sermon on the Bread of Life (John 6:68-69). How then did this confession differ from those that preceded it? To begin with, Jesus explicitly asked for this confession. It was not an emotional response from people who had seen a miracle, but the studied and sincere statement of a man who had been taught by God.

Also, Jesus accepted this confession and built on it to teach His disciples new truth. He must have rejoiced to hear to hear Peter’s words. The Lord knew that Peter could now be led into new steps of deeper truth and service. All of our Lord’s ministry had prepared the way for this experience.¹⁹

3. Who do you say Jesus is? If Peter is right, if there is even the remotest possibility that Jesus Christ is God, then it is crucial that everyone investigate this matter. For if Jesus is God, then what He says about sin, salvation, judgment, and everything else must be true. Our eternal destiny rests on our answer to the question, “Is Jesus really God?”

In his famous book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis makes this statement, “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—on the level with a man who says he is a poached egg—or he would be the Devil of hell. You must take your choice. Either this was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool 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.”²⁰

Jesus could only have been one of four things: a legend, a liar, a lunatic—or Lord and God. There is so much historical and archeological evidence to support His existence that every reputable historian agrees; He was not just a legend. If He were a liar, why would He die for His claim when He could easily have avoided such a cruel death with a few choice words? And, if He were a lunatic, how did He engage in intelligent debates with His opponents or handle the stress of His betrayal and crucifixion while continuing to show a deep love for His antagonists? He said He was Lord and God. The evidence supports that claim.

Where does this leave you? Do you believe that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God”? If you’re not persuaded, I urge you to read the Bible. The best book for you to begin with is the book of John. This means you must not be like most Americans and treat the Bible like junk mail and not even read it!

Salvation isn’t about church, being good, or giving money. Salvation is about your soul and its eternal destiny and your acknowledgement of who Jesus Christ is. The Bible says that when a person dies their body is laid to rest but their soul goes either to heaven or to hell, depending upon the decision you make in this life concerning Jesus. You see, it still boils down to who you believe Jesus to be.

To spend eternity with God, the Bible states that you need to recognize that you are a sinner that you were born in sin and you willingly choose to sin, and more than that, recognize that your sin offends God. Yet, while God despises sin, He loves you. Now you might say, “Well, I believe God to be a God of love. He could never harm me because of His great love,” but you are wrong. God is a God of love, but He is also a God of justice. His holy and righteous nature demands justice. God cannot wink at sin. He cannot overlook it, not for the best of men. To overlook sin and let any man slide would be a slap in the face of the Christ who died for you. God demands payment for sin, and Jesus died on the cross of Calvary, shed His blood to make that payment. It is up to you whether you receive that payment or not. You can refuse it and in essence say to God, “No thanks, I’ll pay my own way.” But those words will result in you spending eternity in hell. Will you acknowledge that you are a sinner and place your faith in Christ alone for your salvation? Who is Jesus to you? You can walk out of here today with Jesus as your Savior, or you can walk out of here with Jesus as your Judge, it is your choice.

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Notes

¹ Dan Story, *Defending Your Faith* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1997), 75.

² In Mark and Luke, Jesus' question leaves out the "Son of Man."

³ The title "Son of Man" appears over 80 times in the Gospels.

⁴ See Matt 3:1-3; 11:9-10; 17:10-13; Mal 4:5-6.

⁵ Only Matthew's account mentions Jeremiah, the first of the so-called latter prophets in the Hebrew canon.

⁶ Ed Glasscock, *Matthew: Moody Gospel Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1997), 339.

⁷ It is interesting that the disciples did not say that some said Jesus was the Messiah. That opinion was not a popular one, reflecting the widespread unbelief in Israel.

⁸ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 420.

⁹ William MacDonald, Ed. Art Farstad, *Believers Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995[1989]), 1266.

¹⁰ Kenneth Boa & Larry Moody, *I'm Glad You Asked* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1982), 135.

¹¹ Matthew, Mark, and Luke immediately follow with Jesus' prediction of His sufferings.

¹² Roy B. Zuck, *Teaching as Jesus Taught* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 243.

¹³ The plural personal pronoun "you" (*humeis*) stands alone at the very head of the question and it also appears again as an element in the 2nd person plural verb (*legete*).

¹⁴ This is the only place in Matthew's gospel that Peter is called by his full name, "Simon Peter" (cf. Matt 4:18; 10:2).

¹⁵ This is the first time anyone in Matthew's narrative has given Jesus the title "Christ," though Matthew himself has used it in 1:1, 16, 17, 18; 2:4; and 11:2.

¹⁶ This is a more definite identification of Jesus as deity than "God's Son" or "a son of God" (Matt 14:33). That title leaves a question open about the sense in which Jesus was God's Son.

¹⁷ Nadasi, *Who Do You Say That I am?*

<http://sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=49631&ContributorID=6268>.

¹⁸ Preaching Today Citation: Ravi Zacharias, "Questions I Would Like to Ask God," *Just Thinking Winter* (1998); submitted by Aaron Goerner, New Hartford, New York.

¹⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary: Vol 1* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1989), 58.

²⁰ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1952 [1943]).