

Identifying and Following Jesus: Part 1

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There comes a time in life when you have to make a decision. You have to take in what you've learned, weigh the options and then take a step. Henry Cloud, in his excellent book *Integrity*, describes this process of action with the analogy of ready, aim, fire. First, you need to get ready. You need to investigate and learn. You've got these options in front of you that you need to explore. After then, you need need to aim. Aiming is about focus. Out of the various options you've investigated you're convinced that option B is the best. But there's more work. You need to focus in on option B and determine all the details required. But eventually, after all of that learning and work, you've got to fire. You have to be able to pull the trigger; you have to make a decision. And with most things in life, pulling the trigger requires faith. Even though you've looked at the options, even though you've focused in on what you think is the best, there's risk in pulling the trigger. You think taking this job is the best one out of all of them; you've been disciplined in asking all the right questions and weighing all the options. But there are still unknowns; you still have to take a step of faith.

This same process is true when it comes to the most important decision we make in life: whether to follow Jesus or not. We can learn and investigate; we can focus in on all the implications of what it might mean to follow Jesus. But eventually, we have to take that step of faith. The passage we are about to read and study over the next few weeks is a call to follow Jesus; it's a call to take a step of faith. The Lord Jesus himself looks his disciples in the eye, you and me also, and says, "Ok, this is who I am and this is where I'm going. Follow me." Read with me our passage this morning feeling the urgency to respond to the call of Jesus. Some of you, maybe, have processed through the "ready" and "aim" phases of faith. You've been hearing and learning about Jesus; you've even focused in on Jesus and what it might mean to follow him. But you haven't quite obeyed Jesus' call to *follow me*; you haven't take that step of faith - you're still holding a back a little. Jesus is calling you today to take that step. I know many of you have responded; you have said "yes" to Jesus when he said follow me. Friends, this passage is still for you. Because it's not merely a one-time decision. Following Jesus requires daily obedience to follow him(READ Luke 9:18-27).

Before we dig into the passage, I want to address something about this need to make a decision. If you've been paying attention to the subtleties of my teaching and preaching over the years, you probably have caught my concern about *decision theology*. Decision theology is the belief that the most important thing required for my salvation, maybe even some would say the *only* thing required for me to be saved, is to decide to follow Jesus. Certainly, what we heard and will study shows that we must take this step of faith; we must decide to follow Jesus. But I also believe that we can elevate this need to the neglect of the equally important need of God's initiation of grace to even believe. Another way of saying that would be: we can't just *decide* to follow Jesus. It's not as simple as deciding between taking a job with AT&T or with Sprint, deciding between a 3 bedroom house or a 4 bedroom house; deciding between marrying Joe or

Steve. Nobody has the power, the ability, the wisdom to follow Jesus; if it's truly and only a decision we'd all decide against following Jesus. In fact, that's exactly what we have all decided; we've put on our walking shoes and headed out the door. We repented, we turned, we decided to follow Jesus because of his sovereign grace. Following Jesus is a miracle of the New Birth. God causes us to be born again by the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit when his glorious word of the gospel is proclaimed and heard. Nobody can follow Jesus until God opens up his or her eyes to see the glory, the splendor of Jesus Christ and his grace.

Peter makes this explicit in the beginning of his first letter, 1 Peter when he says in 1:3, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." God makes us alive to God; God makes us dead to sin. God does that. Later in this same chapter Peter tells us how that happened (23); "since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God." So, we become new, we get saved, through this imperishable seed; this abiding word. What's this imperishable seed that causes us to be born again? Vs. 25b says, "And this word is the good news that we preached to you."

God must act upon us with his merciful grace to be saved. We can only decide when God gives us grace to see. (PIC) Do you recognize this woman? This is Kirsten Powers. Kirsten is well-known in the political world. She worked in the Clinton Administration and is self-described liberal. Yet, she works for Fox News and is against abortion; the murderous actions of abortion doctor Kermit Gosnell out of Philadelphia was splashed on the front pages of the media only because Kirsten Powers reported it on it (You all don't know whether to love her or hate her!) Powers was a self-described atheist, until she wasn't. Today, she is a self-described follower of Jesus. Go read her testimony. What she says is she came to Christ kicking and screaming. She didn't want to believe; she never thought she would believe. But as she was exposed to the gospel more and more God started working on her life. Where eventually, she couldn't help but believe; she couldn't help but follow. The gospel was so compelling (God's truth, God's grace) she became what she says - an unlikely follower of Jesus. God awakened her from her sleep; she decided to come to Jesus. But it wasn't merely a decision; in fact, she resisted coming to Jesus. She didn't want to. But she had to because God made her new.

So, the decision that Jesus is calling for is a decision, but it's a decision that he enables by his grace. It's a step of faith that is birthed by the sovereign grace of Jesus (we'll see this in a minute). It's mysteriously both. It is a decision; we must choose and take that step of faith that alters our life. But it's one gifted by the merciful grace of God who adopts us into his family.

Now, notice first from Luke 9 how this call towards faith starts with identifying Jesus. This where it starts. Who is Jesus? The question has been asked by various people in various ways. Back in chapter 4 when Jesus was home in Nazareth his friends, his family asked (I'm paraphrasing here), "Who does Jesus think he is? We know he's the son of Joseph and Mary."

In chapter 5 when Jesus said to the paralyzed man, “Your sins are forgiven you,” the Pharisees asked, “Who is this that speaks blasphemies? Only God can forgive sins.” In chapter 8 when the disciples were stunned silent when Jesus calmed the storm they ask, “Who then is this, that he commands even winds and water, and they obey him?” In chapter 9, the wicked king Herod asks, “Who is this about whom I hear such things?” Over and over again throughout the Gospel of Luke people are wondering and asking, “Who is Jesus?”

And now Jesus turns to his disciples to ask them. Jesus sets up his question to them by asking about popular opinion. Jesus asks in vs. 18, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” What do others think? What have you been hearing? They’ve been hearing what everybody else has been hearing. John the Baptist. Elijah. Some other prophet of God. Why not? Look at all the stuff that Jesus has been doing. He must be someone important. But Jesus moves on and asks the disciples what they think. In vs. 20 Jesus says, “Who do you say that I am?”

This is where it starts for every single one of us, doesn’t it? Who do *you* say Jesus is? Now, if we’ve been paying attention to the Gospel of Luke Peter could have answered that question many different ways, right? He could have said, “You’re the one who tells people they’re sins are forgiven (chapter 4).” “You’re the one who heals the sick and casts out demons (chapter 7).” Or “You’re the one who calms the winds and waves (chapter 8).” That’s all correct, isn’t it? Jesus is the one who does all those things. But what does that mean? Put that all together. Yes, he’s the one who heals the sick, who casts out demons, who forgives sins, who has power over the natural world, who takes a small meal of 5 loaves and 2 fish and feeds 5000 people. But what does that make him?

Luke has been building to this climactic moment that leads to the most important conclusion ever: Jesus is the Christ of God. He’s the One. There’s this great scene in the movie *The Matrix* (PIC). In *The Matrix* this man named Neo is believed to be the one prophesied to save the human race from the machines. But there’s this thread of doubt throughout the movie that he might not be; even Neo ends up doubting it. But there comes a time when Neo acts to save others, to save his friends and his power, wisdom, actions all defy understanding; his ability, his heroism, his commitment. And as (PIC) Tank watches everything Neo’s heroism through his computer screen the weight of the evidence leads him to only one conclusion; he says, “I knew it. He’s the One!”

That’s what Luke has been trying to do. Over 8 chapters. Hundreds of verses. Story after story of Jesus’ amazing work; the evidence is so overwhelming. So when Jesus asks Peter in vs. 20, “Who do you say that I am?” There’s only one answer: *You are the Christ of God*. That’s what that word Christ means. The chosen one, anointed one. The one we’ve been waiting for. The one God promised to send. The king. The deliverer. The savior.

But get this: Peter certainly connected the dots, right? His healings, his miracles, his teachings. Casting out demons, feeding 5000 and commanding the wind and the waves to be silent. But when Matthew recorded this same event and this same interaction between Jesus

and Peter, he wants Peter and you and me to know that this understanding, too, was a gift of God. In Matthew 16:17 we read, “And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.’” God gave you this gift of revelation! To see, to know, to understand the Jesus is the Christ was a gift of God given to Peter and it’s a gift of God given to you and me.

Following Jesus starts here; who do you say Jesus is? Who is he? What do you say, my good friends? There are all kinds of opinions out there. Some say he’s a great teacher; just as great as Muhammad or Ghandi. But not greater and not more than a teacher. Some say Jesus is almost everything we’ve mentioned. Powerful. Loving. Kind. Merciful. He’s certainly all of those things. But he’s not one to make demands on us. Do you know what I mean? He doesn’t demand our obedience. He doesn’t demand that we obey him with our money. He doesn’t demand that we obey him with our time, in our family lives, with our sexuality, with our thoughts or words. We’ll see this as we progress further, but that’s not the Christ of God Peter believed in. The Christ of God is Lord, is Master, is King. The Christ of God is the one who demands complete and total obedience (and what’s so great about Jesus is that he enables us by his mercy and grace to be obedient to him... we can’t be by ourselves). Friends, we will be constantly tempted to believe in a Jesus of our own imaginations; we must believe in the Jesus as presented in the Scriptures.

Discovering the identity of Jesus is just the beginning. We must also see and understand his method. And then we must also take that step of faith, we must make that decision, to follow Jesus. But it starts here. You won’t care about his method and you won’t be willing to obey his call to follow until you first settle in your mind who this man is. Who is Jesus? Who do you say that he is?

(PIC) John Wesley is without a doubt one of the greatest missionaries of the modern church. For most of his adult life before dying in 1791, Wesley was devoted to spreading the good news of Jesus to whoever would hear. It’s believed that he traveled 250,000 miles on horseback where he preached over 40,000 sermons (that means if he ministered 40 years he preached 1000 sermons a year, or around 3 per day telling people about Jesus). But amazingly, in his early years while preaching, he struggled with his own salvation wondering if he was saved. For a period of his life, he ministered with and found comfort from the Moravian Christians (basically, a Christian community from Germany). And one of his Moravian friends asked him what he thought of Jesus; Wesley replied, “He is the Son of God and the Savior of the world!” But what his friend asked in reply led him towards truly receiving him when he said, “But is he your savior?” Friends, who is he? Who do you say is Jesus?

Key verse: Luke 9:20

Questions for the week

- How important is it to make a decision for Jesus? How important is it for God to act on our souls by his grace? Are you comfortable with how these *fit together*?

- What are some of Jesus' acts that indicate to you that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ of God? Imagine not having our church or the Bible and hearing this news about Jesus like others in the 1st century; what would be important for you to know?
- How do you identify Jesus *factually*? How do you identify Jesus *personally*? Why are both of these important?